



THE EMERALD CANTICLE OF HERMES

by Jay Halpern

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Bloomsday

He walked the streets of Dublin
and Trieste and Zurich and Paris,
twisting a stick between his be-ringed fingers,
secure in the knowledge that he was confessing all,
that- Rom.11:32- the greater the sin,
the greater God's mercy...

And in his later years he sat in churches- of all places!-
peering from within his own darkness and pain
into the darkness and pain of holy stone,
icons of martyrs and the dying Christ,
amidst stone filigree like pendant lace and stays...

And he must have thought to himself,
"How has my story become the Ur-story of all men,
and my odd language of confession the Ur-language of all tongues?"
No doubt he felt the irony of it
in the cool darkness of the stone
and the hot darkness of his aching eyes and belly
and would have choked back laughter
but for the pain...

The Lamentation of Hipparus of Metapontum (550 BC)

I had thought that, at least among mystics,
my Soul's fire to probe to the Center of all things
would find co-conspirators, ungentle collaborators
eager to risk and pledge All in the name of Truth.
Imagine my surprise, then, when on a sea voyage
I discovered through geometric methods
that not all mathematical entities could be expressed
as the ratio of integers and, sharing this momentous revelation
with my Fellow-Travelers- disciples of Pythagoras, all-
they with one Mind laid violent hands on me,
horrified at the violation of the Canon
and hurled me overboard
into the green and foaming Sea.

O
had my tongue been free to bury their treachery
beneath a torrent of pity imprecations
I would have died a happy man; but as one
unaccustomed to the swimmer's skill
I kept my breath for my life and not my honor,
surviving long enough to feel the swell
of a great mountain of wet, cold flesh
and to glimpse a flaming eye nested in wrinkles.
And then it was done, a rush of water and darkness,
a thunder in my ears, my fill of brine swill,
a paralysis of lungs...
I was inside the belly of the beast,
condemned to live and marvel at the horror
of my turn of Fate's Wheel.

Endless
immersed in the growling stench
and roughage of implacable digestion,
churned by caverns of smooth mucosa,
burned by gels and acids and fetid winds,
sickened by the rot and fecal integument
that were the core and mainstay of the Great Creature's life.
Madness, I confess, ensued; not a thought for the gods
or my distant home, or the principles
of Elemental Order and Harmony propelling
the Starry Spheres and the flux and swell
of mankind's habitations...
I confess myself mad with the horror,
without thought other than Darkness,
without feeling other than Pain.
Then suddenly, after hours or days or weeks,
there was a convulsion of my dark world,
thrusting me ashore clinging to undigested driftwood,
coated with slime,
scorched by a sudden and relentless Sun.

Nineveh they called the place
and me they called Jonah the Madman,
mad enough to be a prophet of God...
and though I babbled incoherencies
I had learned enough to warn them against the Wrath
and to hide themselves in inoffensive conformity
and know that behind the breaking of Established Lies
there is an eye of Fire, nested in wrinkles,
implacable as the dark sea.

(Icarus, NYU, Spring '97)

Occasional Poems

1

John Lennon - In Memoriam

I scrape together the pieces
of my death-shattered brain

like when Santos, the super,
scraped broken glass off the street
after the fire

like when the perplexed doctors
did what they could with Lennon's shattered plumbing
and removed the docile bullets
with gentle hands.

Christ it's a fine day for snow.

Outside the Dakota they ignore the chill
like white cells clotted in an open wound.

Snow threatens from the gray sky.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY" floated in that same sky
only a month ago in huge unmistakable letters;
of course, that sky wasn't so gray.

Another death, Manhattan:
that lowest staff in your endless symphony,
the dirge, the basso profundo beneath
the melody of flutes and harps.

His song of peace is today a chant;
it rises, funereal, from the clustered people
with red eyes.

The eyes and that song don't fit, somehow.
The people have become ghosts
in their grief.

Nothing seems to fit, somehow,
on this morning dreary as death,
when the sky threatens snow.

My brain fragments squirm to make sense
of his death but,
like maggots,
they only manage to stink.

I've heard Manhattan's song of death before:

when that kid, Henry, got in with the Spanish Mafia
and paid for his Cadillac and gaudy girls

with a bomb in his face,
Amen;

when a concrete scroll fell off Columbia's building
and spread that girl's brains all over the sidewalk
in front of the bookstore,
Amen;

when that little girl got gang-banged
on the roof of the Project
and was tossed off
leaf twisting down like a black rag doll,
Amen;

when the old lady on east fifth
had to wait for a burglar to discover
her corpse,
Amen;

when two naked women were found
in a motel near the Hudson
amid billows of black smoke
having misplaced their heads and hands
Amen;

Amen, amen:
Christ, I could go on until all our stomachs retched
the puke of the world.

Time is perhaps a balm
as are the gray faces perhaps of the mourners
gathered like ghosts under the sunless sky,
or his song perhaps chanted and upward-driven
into that sullen, indelicate sky.

I'd rather sing of Orpheus
who made even Death and the ghosts of Hell weep
with his lyre and tongue and lamentations
for his dead love;

who, spurning women from his sorrow,
taught the love of boys to the men of Thrace;

who, enraging the cruel Maenads with his chastity,
was torn to pieces by their wanton claws
while the tears of the gentle rivers
carried his lyre and lips
out to sea--

See?

Even the ancient tales with all their beauty
are laden with butchered blood.

Afloat on the waves
the lips of Orpheus sang and sang and sang;
the gutstrings of the lyre plucked forth weary music
in the froth of waves:

God help us, Amen! God help us, Amen! God help us, Amen!

Manhattan's song is eternal.

Christ, it's a fine day for snow.

2

On the Death of Rabin

I have no doubt the Haggadists
of a future age

will write of his death:

“And the Lord God,

seeing that he was flushed
with the Shekinah

and full of blessings
determined to reward him

for his penance for his stiff-necked past
by granting him sudden death

at the hands of one whose crime
would hasten the silence of those who wanted war.

And the Lord God
appeared before his wondering soul

in a blaze of glory
perched upon the radiant Merkibah

and invited him to ride with Him to his new home;
and the weight of lead in his flesh

had so lightened his spirit
that the delicately-winged wheel

neither wobbled to the left nor the right
but rose straight up for glory.”

The Dancer
(for Lola Valentine)

I wake up early,
sweep dead roaches off the floor,
shut my window for the millionth time
to keep out the stench of Old Mrs. Meyrowitz's impending death,
and search for hints of sun
among the alley shadows.
The Hare Krishna have begun their chant across the alley
and I listen carefully to feel the peace they feel,
but even slow breathing doesn't help,
I feel nothing.

* * *

Dead and dying faces read the same subway ads:
"You've come a long way, baby!"
"Preparation H -- for fast relief"
"Even nice people get VD".
I shut my eyes and forget
the smell of stale urine.

* * *

The boss carries a gun on his right hip.
He tries to look tough.
The muscular Jamaicans who make change,
handsome as Memnon,
laugh behind his back.
His fat paw reaches for my breast
when I'm in costume:
eyes without life.

* * *

I dance without seeing the faces beyond the footlights.
Naked, I slowly sway,
my dance formless but for my form,
a gesture of prolonged and absolute movement.
Demons on the parapets of Hell
dance like me.

* * *

Long since Orion's left the center of the sky.
I dance dreamily in front of my mirror:
naked, and a candle burns.
No music from the stereo because Mrs. Meyrowitz complains
and she's old, near death, rotten with tumors.
Really, that's okay: long ago she danced,
and now she needs the silence.
I don't need music for my dance.
From the open window
I'm raped by the night's wind.

*

*

*

If death were nothing more
than the freedom to fill the darkness between the stars
with my dance,
I'd count God my greatest friend.

A Poet to His Muse

I'll just have to tell it as I see it:
the crystal spheres between us and the 9th heaven
have started to crack;
the angels are falling through;
there's a rush and mixture
of tainted air and pure.
It's all going to be different now.
We're saved.
The cavalry's coming, their guns blazin'!
But the secret is
there's no lights nor lightnings nor voice of thunder;
nothing we can see, or smell, or touch:
there's voices (perhaps you'd call them),
speaking the rhythms of history,
invisibly whispering into our auras-
psychoacoustically-
waking the mandala in our minds' eye...
What can I say they make us think?
How to make it palpable to you wading through this poem,
tarantulas picking their way on taut hairs
between dimensions...?
O Muse,
let me invoke my lust for you:
I've broken into manhood,
thieved into its back window,
tip-toed into its front parlor.
I've got my feet up on the plush tasseled ottoman.
There's jasmine tea brewed for me in a sake cup,
steam floating up, under the lamplight,
like hot breath on a snowy, midwinter night;
you come out naked,
your breasts staring me right in the eye,
and, naive as Paris,
I'm stone still, and melt...
O Muse, teach me how to use my tongue with words,
as you've taught me to use it between your legs:
con brio, allegro.

Dante on the IRT

I once saw a man on the IRT who wore Dante's face.
All his life, most probably, he'd been convinced
that his angry eyes and crooked nose were ugly,
which was partly why he held that overlarge, bitter head of his
on bent shoulders like a heavy stone.
He looked at me looking, scowled, and turned away.
I would have walked over to him and said,
"But your face is Dante's, a badge of honor,
a gift from the poetic gods!"
But I said nothing, for an honor bestowed without preface,
or a gift bestowed without enlightenment,
may be more burden than anything else.
Besides, I figured he would think me a fool,
or a fag on the make,
and will me, beneath his breath,
to the deepest pit of Hell.

My Dybbuk, My Virtue

There's a dybbuk following me around,
a demon from the Ancient Days,
and he plays tricks on me to let me know
I'm not forgotten.
He's made me float outside of my body;
he's pinned me to my mattress so I couldn't move;
he's roared unholy waters in my ears;
he's sent a naked witch with a pug snout to squat on me
and worm my cock inside her;
he's given me the spins in the middle of my sleep
so I'd groan and claw myself awake;
he's a mischievous one, that dybbuk.

But I'm a crafty one, myself.
I've learned from the lore of the East
that it's the bending reed that survives the wind.
So I've let my dybbuk think he's got it easy,
that corrupting me's a cinch.
But it's all a scam, my friends:
I'm no Jacob, see, who wrestled with an angel
and lost a piece of his thigh.
If I tackled my dybbuk fair and square,
I'd lose both nuts for sure.
So I let my dybbuk squat on my shoulder and think he's got it easy;
I can feel him growing fat and lazy, and,
on the sly, when he's not looking,
I sneak out a moral poem or a good deed,
when he's not looking...
Let him get good and bored and start looking around
for better worlds to conquer:
and when he's so fat and lazy that his bat wings
barely flutter the solar wind,
I'll shaft him with my virtue, drop him with left and right
good deeds like a bad habit,
and cast my own eyes upward
for better worlds to conquer.

Diocles

Gather among tombs,
lips pressed to lips:
the boys touch
and laugh,
their tongues dancing.
Diocles, come forth,
stretch out your hand;
your lover lived beneath
your shield (to mourn
your heroism and
death:
be content that horror
and lost love
have blossomed into garlands
of gay flowers)
and immortal songs.

The Sign

Carpocrates, the Gnostic, came home one day
and found his best friend's cock
in his wife's mouth.

"Well, then," he mused, as the two
struggled into their robes, muttering excuses,
"this must be a sign from that alien God
that there is much more to be known than I have known."

So he waved his best friend and his wife
back to what they had been doing
without a word of reproach
and quietly shut the door.

Is it any wonder, then, that his son,
Epiphanes, had the precocious wisdom
to write before his death at seventeen:
"The most absurd of all earthly laws
is the one that has the temerity to say:
'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife,'
for it repudiates community
and deliberately chooses separation."

Charon's Jeer

(Written for the Urban Techno-Savages'
performance at the University of New Haven
that no one came to see)

The roll call's a-comin' --
just you climb aboard;
don't mind it if yer headin'
fer the wrath o' the Lord.
Lemme take your hand
instead o' stumblin' in:
yer not the first to weaken
from the wages o' yer sin.
Yer crazy eyes are blinded
by the light o' what ya done;
but now's too late to think it out:
c'mon and join the fun!
We like to think we're party-folk
down here amid the slime:
there's a-howlin' and a-yowlin'
and a general good time.
The big shots thump their bellies
and their toadies eat their shit,
and tho' the stink is really ripe
they don't mind it one damn bit.
The ladies ain't so lovely
as they used ta think they were,
but naked, man, is naked,
so just slip it in their fur.
That is, if ya can disengage
from Crazy Fritz's* lust:
he's gonna hop yer achin' back
and pump ya til ya bust.
Or if ya make it past the flame
that broils by the sea,
or past the lakes o' excrement
that surge eternally...
Don't shake so bad, my little man,
yer future ain't that bleak.
It ain't that Hell's so whoppin' bad:
it's just yer stomach's weak.
So give it time, my little louse,
and you'll learn to get along.
Just keep in mind you heard it first
in good ol' Charon's song.

*Fritz Harmann - "The Hanover Vampire" - brutal, insane, cannibalistic homosexual who committed a multitude of horrible murders in Germany in the 1920's; a pre-cursor to our own Jeffrey Daumer.

Photo by J.C.

(inspired by a contribution to Hustler's Beaver Hunt;
who says art can't be found in unlikely places?)

1

"Well, I don't know..."

"C'mon. What's the big deal?
A picture isn't you.
It's not your skin, your mouth,
your smooth legs.
C'mon. It can't hurt any."

"You really want me to?
You?
And when I looked at Howard wrong,
like I had an eye for him,
you flipped out."

"That was diff'rent.
I'm diff'rent now.
A changed man.
C'mon."

"S'ppose he sees it?"

"Who?"

"Howard."

"S'ppose he does.
He'll...
he'll eat his heart out."

Atalanta sprinted for the golden apples.
 She looked both ways, quickly,
 measured the yards between her and the pack.

A wordless song trembled happily through her brain.
 It bid her dance but she laughed it off.
 "Tomorrow," she whispered,
 clutching the cold, smooth fruit,
 "tomorrow I'll dance for the Naeads
 and the other forest folk
 on the great gray rock overlooking
 the palace and the marketplace."

Sunburst streak of gold,
 another apple flew past her greedy eyes,
 flinging her off-track like a comet.

"How's this?"

"Christ, you're sexy..."

"I'm vulgar, you mean;
 All you men mean 'vulgar' when you say 'sexy'."

"That's not fair.
 I say what I say. I mean it."

"O look at me like this:
 you ever see a painting arched and spread like this?"

"You're no painting. You're a woman.
 You have heat.
 You make men melt.
 Paintings don't make men melt.
 Flip over."

"Melt? Hah!
 Nothing's getting soft on you,
 I can see."

"That can't be helped.
 That's nature: a testament
 to your beauty."

Sappho bid Anacrontia farewell
with tears.
She lost all words.

Anacrontia watched Sappho from the deck,
her innards rising, falling
with the sea swell.

*There's a bit of there and then
in every here and now,*
Sappho mulled.

*And why not see new shores
and make myself anew with love,*
Anacrontia sighed.

Those sweet silk nights,
musk-nuggets tossed on the flame,
their fingertips tickling flames of flesh,
flame shadows dancing...

"You realize something?"

"What?"

"You've never seen me like this before.
A man never sees his real woman like this,
just by doing normal things."

"So?
So I never saw you like this before?
So what of it?"

"You can see the hidden parts.
All those folds and flaps and puckers
you like to feel but never,
not once,
saw just like this."

"So?"

"It's funny, that's all.
I think it's a scream.
Are they different, those parts?
Are they what you expected?"

"Now look, I'm no doctor...
I had no... expectations.
Skin is skin, parts are parts,
and a woman is a woman."

Aphrodite suspected he'd be good
so she took a taste of it
and got snagged.

He growled, he raged, his warrior's voice
grew hoarse.
The other gods laughed.

Aphrodite laughed with them, in spite of herself,
watching him strain against the net,
the invisible net.

He really got pissed.
He stared at her perfect teeth,
wanting to smash them.

She couldn't help it,
laughing;
he was so damn funny.

They looked like stuck dogs.
"Wouldn't mind a piece of that, myself,"
Zeus snickered, but quietly, to himself.

And Hera thought, "...and all these eyes,
these EYES... watching...
they stare, poised to taste..."

And Hephaestos, the cripple, simply grinned,
showing teeth, his bent body
taut with the bitter humor.

"Where does normal end and sick begin,
I wonder?"

"You worried? Don't. You're normal."

"These things inside me...yeah.
Sometimes they make me feel good.
Sometimes I feel like a clown.
Sometimes I feel...
nothing."

"I feel them in you with my eyes.
They fascinate.
You fascinate."

"You're dripping, boy...
It weeps, ha ha.
Have you taught its mouth to speak?"

Herod Antipas licks his lips.
He craves, yet fears, the flinging of
the last veil.

Opulent cushions; ruby arabesques
set atop the marble columns,
tremble in the torch light,
the blue-veined marble columns,
trembling in the torch light.

The bitch has won, he thinks.
Shades of dead kings, his forebears,
line the hall and whisper incantations.
The smell of burnt roast mixes
with the smell of death.

Her tiny, rigid belly gleams with sweat.
She watches Herod's eyes and knows
the grimy man below in chains,
the madman shouting his hate to desert devils
will never more see daylight
or sniff the desert winds.

"And now what?"

"It's just you and me."

"Not that. The pictures."

"O, the pictures. Ha ha.
They're not so important now.
I'm drained."

"You? How sad, little boy...!
After what I've just done,
I feel no pity."

"I don't want pity."

"The pictures. What happens now?"

"Y'know,
watching you come like that,
the way you bucked,
the way you pulled it slowly,
in and out,
y'know..."

"The pictures, lover boy. What now?"

"Wait, wait, an idea..."

Wait, it's almost...

Damn!

You made me lose the words,
worrying about the goddamn pictures."

"Then tell me."

"I get them printed
we pick the best
and sent it off."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"I hope Howard sees it."

"So? So what if he does?"

"So look in his eyes next time
you see him on the street."

Hell

Sometimes tomorrows string themselves along seaweed fronds
like clam shells, dead and half-buried in the sand,
stirred only by the harshest currents.
They lack wit and the pulp of life.
Sometimes I fear that at the end of the string of my tomorrows
I will know Hell to be a perpetual memory,
sealed in the dead surge of my skull,
of wasted hours, wrong lovers, misdirected words,
and pain needlessly inflicted on the innocent.
Hell is the tally of all our losses coupled with a sort of cruel amnesia
of anything we might have gained in passage through this life:
Hell is the mistress of Guilt, lesbian, chinless,
whose well-meaning buck teeth
bite hard.

The Holy City

(written from a dream)

The Jews I've known who have said, "Next year in Jerusalem!"
were thinking of a city serviced by El Al Airlines
with air-conditioned hotels, pharmacies for their pills
and powders, discotheques where gangling, dark-eyed
Jacobs seek their Rachels under glitter-balls and strobes.
Where, then, is the Holy City I have known,
the city of ragged prophets, and flames, and locusts?
The city whose inhabitants are scorched, not tanned,
by the sun?
The city where winds and waters speak madness?

I am a Levite, and first-born,
possibly the Prince of my people,
quite possibly the Messiah.
I've had my share of visions and strange dreams,
and I have known my people, not just the Jews,
and I have learned the language of workers,
and my back and thighs have felt the trudge
of treadmills.
This, too, I'll say,
that I like the feel of sweat dripping down my face,
and I like knowing my back and thighs are strong
to help bear my brothers' burdens.
And I like those meditative moments in the snowy woods
when the angels speak to me in tiny crackling voices
like bits of ice borne on the wind.
And I like the smell of dead dry wood aflame,
and the feel of its warmth, and the dance of the flames
bearing the brightness of that unknown, resplendent God.

It has been said that he who sees the salamander in the flame
shall be blessed.
Well, my friends, I have seen the salamander squirm in the sun, itself,
and I have seen placid rainbow skies,
and stars which frolic into immense Ferris wheels,
and carousels,
and I have ridden the wind.
When the day comes
that those bright lavender mushroom clouds sprout suddenly on all horizons,
and all the faces of all the angels
will glare down at us from that painful brightness,
I will recall my people and their ways,
and all my loves,
and all the lives I've lived while waiting for that moment,
and I will rejoice, and my soul will rise among the clouds
with all the others, and I will be the prince of all my people,
Everywhere,
in the Holy City,
Everywhere.

And Then What?

(for Rabbi Eric Polokoff)

Frankly, my heart doesn't bleed for the Prophets and their torments;
at least they had the solace of God's Voice
assuaging their driven dreams:
not like us, isolated from each other,
hurled toward infamy by passions of unknown origin,
addicted to the thrill of wine and danger,
charred as children by hidden flames,
left on the roadside for dead by comrades
who no longer hear our voices in the niter:
where is the shamas who keeps the ark-candle lit?
Has he paused in his rounds long enough
to glance beyond the stained-glass and see me
standing in the snow?
And then what? I can't hear their tired voices anymore,
nor can I understand their speaking in tongues...
I am alone.
the aleph-beis textures every square inch of my flesh.
In the courtyard of the Temple I swing a massive mallet,
calling the angels to assemble:
I am mad with visions.
And they flutter down, jostling for space.
And then what?

(The Tapestry, Teikyo Post University, 1997)

Mrs. Meyrowitz

(in memoriam)

Old Mrs. Meyrowitz had the stink of death around her,
but I had to fix her toilet anyway, down on east fifth,
so I held my nose and watched the fear in her wretched eyes
that I, a stranger, was sent to kill her.
No, Mrs. M, I wasn't the angel of death,
nor did I carry a golden quill and thick book
with which to tally your sins and levy judgment.
I was merely a workman sent to fix your toilet.
I saw then, not for the first or last time,
that there are things worse than death,
like slow decay, and loneliness,
and being so poor and weak
that a stranger must interrupt your dying
to fix your toilet.
Unlike Hamlet, I don't fear death:
I have maximized my options, as they say.
Yet I'm still here and I suppose I should be proud
I'm here through my own choice,
not through intimidation.
She, too, was still there, letting nature take its course,
in spite of the stench and the loneliness and the poverty
and the fear of strangers with beards and earrings
sent to kill and judge her.
Maybe she was just too stupid or too terrified or too weak
to do any better for herself:
I don't know.
But, Mrs. M, I tip my hat to the cloud on which you now float,
and wink at your young, immortal body
which down here smelled so bad.

The Midwife

(for Vicki)

There's wisdom in her eyes (I can tell you that).
She lives alone in the forest,
her children long since dead,
several having died of the plague
beneath the very walls of the cathedral
where she prayed for their lives...
Yet a different breed of god became a presence in her life;
her hands grew skillful
and soothed the birth pangs of weary young girls
who had surrendered themselves to their fantasies of love;
her eyes grew cunning in their search for wildflowers
and the sort of succulent tree bark
that brews the best medicine;
her fingers, though dry and puckered now like the
bark of her beloved trees,
can feel for the pulse of ripeness in the spongy moss...
O yes, in spite of the gossip that her herbs and flowers
are the gifts of devils,
she still lives, marveled at and beloved,
deep in the forest, close to her flowers and herbs...
And yes, she's far enough away from the authorities
who fear the skills of a cunning woman,
a woman who has learned the joy of suckling at the
Great Mother's Breast,
a woman bent with trials and years...
They only leave her in peace (I tell you)
as long as she stays put,
crouched like a lioness on the outpost of their
domain,
alone and in darkness,
serving only the poor in their need
(poor women who tell her name secretly with their
bead, in the very shadow of the cathedral,
I can tell you that...)

(The Tapestry, Teikyo Post University, 1997)

The Moonlight

(for Jackie)

It must be the moonlight after the rain
that fills me with ideas, Eurydice,
or your soft presence.
I'm not a man for whom ideas come easily;
I'm a wonderer, an observer,
an experimenter with chord-changes.
When the rocks move and the trees sway to my music,
I'm as astounded as everyone else:
Joyful, yes, but no less astounded.
But tonight I'm in control;
I don't know what it is ---
a completeness to my thoughts,
an ordering of part to part ---
a triumph of my will.
Yes, I suppose that's it:
tonight I'm not blown on the winds of wonderment
but, instead, rise like the moon
and purify the crisp air
with a bright, white beam of vision.
Once I saw a moon like this
rise behind an enchanted mountain
with a crystal peak.
Selene's features altered as she rose,
liberated by the awesome lens,
and she moved her lips and eyes
and whispered something to me
I didn't quite catch...
Since that night I've regretted my deafness
regarding outcries of the soul.
But tonight, Eurydice --- come closer ---
I'll credit your words of love
with making me, for a moment,
wise.

The Photograph

I happened, by chance, upon a photograph of myself
reading Pound's Cantos.
I asked myself then, "Where is the poem written by that man
worthy of that face?
My enemies will say, "Look for it on toilet stalls in Grand Central Station."
My friends will say, "It is still within the womb of your thigh,
awaiting rebirth."

Bar Mitzvah

I didn't know the Jews had an Angel of Night and Conception-
last year I read it in a book of Jewish lore.
They had kept all the good stuff from me when I was a kid, I suppose,
fearing for my soul.
When I met my old rabbi on fifth and 54th,
I caught the delicate fabric of his shiny suit
and introduced myself, feeling a bit shy and presumptuous:
I hadn't seen him in years.
He looked at my long hair and beard and scruffy clothes
and told me quickly that why yes,
he, too, was a devotee of the literary arts,
a Russian lit scholar, in fact,
and would I give his best to my parents,
he was on his way to Rizzoli's to buy a certain book,
goodbye, trying all the while
to keep the Oy Vey way back in his throat.
I didn't remind him that he had refused
to officiate at my father's funeral -
he sent a replacement who knew even less about
who the corpse once had been,
so I gave the eulogy, myself,
which turned out OK in the end,
all things considered.

I remember the rabbi's daughter: she was in my grade,
a beautiful girl in spite of her large, hooked nose
(which has, no doubt, long since been "repaired").
She hung out with the right crowd, was a cheerleader,
went to all the right parties on the north side of town,
and only fucked the right boys, class presidents and such...

And the memories cascade...

like when Jeff and his gang
had me pinned down in the park with their CO2 pellet guns:
I went to his Bar Mitzvah and watched him become a man;

like when I was a kid being a Jew meant only that once a week
I read the English transliteration of the Hebrew on the facing page;

like when my dad and uncles told ethnic jokes with a certain inflection;

like when my mother told me I was bought back from Temple
after I found old silver dollars and an unused rubber in my baby-book
(a bad deal for her she learned in later life...);

like when sometimes the congregation chanted the Shema
and sunlight streamed through the tall windows
glorying the ark and breastplate of the Torah,
I would weep silently, holding it back,
not wanting to be seen:
that was my Jewishness.

So when I sat in the little white church in the woods,
years later, an exile from my childhood,
and felt the Prophet's presence in the seat next to me
like an older brother with his arm around my shoulder,
I did it, I was washed in mystical waters,
my lady bringing me flowers,
my neighbor's little girl all smiles as she watched,
my friend, Jack, doubtful, but at my side anyway:
and I became, like the Prophet,
a mystic and a Jew,
for once and all.

The following Yom Kippur I played the Kol Nidre
on my radio show, and read Weisel's reminiscence
of a Yom Kippur in a concentration camp where, at last,
one old Jew refused to fast and implore forgiveness
for sins he didn't commit.
That was my Bar Mitzvah, at the age of thirty,
with only my lady listening and a few invited guests
and none of my family who told their ethnic, racist jokes
with that certain inflection. It wasn't catered,
but afterwards in the parking lot, as I strolled to my motorcycle,
the Angel of Night and Conception filled me with his cold, sweet breath,
and I felt like I'd drunk a cup or two or three of Mogen David
at the right hand of God, and there were no fancy pens,
no embossed cards holding checks in special folders,
no *hava nagilah*, and no ethnic jokes
told with that certain inflection.

The Poems of Jen H'sien

(a fragment)

1

I am the king of polished jade:
10,000 candle flames dance in my eyes.
Upon you who are more than beauty,
I focus the power of my alicorn
and bid you rise from the dead.
We meet as lovers: thus kiss the winds.
I stride into your dreams
and scatter blue lotus petals.
Your sleep is shattered by the screams
of stars.

2

I wish to retreat into the nothingness
between two moments.
It wheels like a Great Mandala:
walk with me into our dream,
fluttering woman.

3

Formless as these clouds of dream
floats the Lotus God: I suspect
he watches me, amused.
He speaks in sunset colors
and the ruby eye of the Bull.
I hear him clearly across eons,
and I am comforted.
His petals pry into every darkness.

O Lotus God, friend of my soul,
embrace my incantations
and send them forth!

An Ode to My Lover When She Is Angry

(to Jackie)

O distant lover,
I search among the stars
for omens of your signal grace.

When I am far from you,
I'm nothing but an actor on a stage
put through my lines and paces
by a confused and yearning heart.

I am a creature of love
far broader than that sea of stars.
I love, yet would as well be loved.

To touch your fingers once more,
and brush the smooth flesh of your neck
against my cheek is all I ask
of those stars and that overwhelming
Presence.

We are gifts given to each other
by a nature nobler and wiser
than ourselves.

That is why on this night of stars
I weep in words, yet force my eyes dry.
My soul is arid,
though I make it seem moist
and full of pulp.

Where do I go with this love?
As Cyrano crooned his hopeless
passion in the dark,
I, too, wail my sorrow to the night
and call all feast days false.

At the Shrine of Prince Deki

(for Brian Trusiewicz)

...and then the spirit of the boy stepped forward:
"My only friends were little people I took out of my mind
to play with;
we sang songs together;
they rode my shoulder as I climbed
pine trees sticky with sap;
they corrected my aim with the bow and arrow,
until, of course, that day my arrow,
falling straight down after its flight,
killed a sparrow that happened to be
at the wrong place, at the wrong time:
the others were ghosts, Prince Deki,
the others who were meant to love me
and take care of me, all ghosts:
their whispers smelled like death
and cobwebs hid their eyes."

The boy waited quietly while Prince Deki
stroked his long beard. "Over there,"
he gestured, and the boy walked on.

*

The spirit of the youth approached
with eyes that wanted to sing:
"I loved many girls, Prince Deki,"
he chanted. "I woke songs from their
breasts and their thighs held me tightly
around my middle, until my heart
sang with their breasts and we shared
a relentless and exhilarating heat."

Prince Deki studied the youth's clear, proud eyes,
stroked his forehead, took a deep breath
and gestured him onward.

*

The spirit of the man, his eyes cunning,
a sword at his side, a staff in his hand,
stepped boldly forward:
"I fought many battles against the Devil,
Old Yama," he said without pride.
"I cared for the weak, loved one woman
only, and plowed stony soil into a
place of flowers and berries."

Prince Deki nodded, twisting one tip
of his mustache, and wagged his finger
toward the further path.

*

The spirit of the patriarch, leaning on a stick,
ventured forward at his own slow pace,
in his own sweet time. "Prince Deki,"
he said, "I have seen many walls crumble,
many nights without stars. My heart,
in its own manner, has rebuilt those walls,
has restored stars to the heavens, and comets, too...
There is little I have not done,
even less I cannot do..."

Prince Deki nodded, smiling: "Go," he said,
and patted the old man on the back,
indicating with his black-nailed thumb
a pavilion upon a distant hill,
under a gnarled blue spruce, sticky with sap,
nourished by nutmeg winds from the south
and the sound of silver bells.

*

Thus are the souls of common folk dealt with,
and thus is eternity enriched
under Prince Deki's astute eye.

Marie LeVeau

(conceived at her tomb)

Somewhere in my blood,
mixed between the white mash and the black mash,
I feel the pounding dance of gods and pounding drums,
pounding, pounding:
somewhere in my deepest memory,
I hear screaming animals as they die in the midnight trees,
dying, dying:
somewhere in my half-breed heart,
I feel the rage of the dispossessed as they scavenge
to feed their souls,
weeping, weeping:
my name is Marie LeVeau:
I shout it into the blank stares of the gentility;
I pull their eyes to mine and charm their dull senses
with tarot cards and monkey paws.
In my small shop I curl their soft hair
and trim their perfect nails
and listen like an unseen ghost
to their gossip and confessions,
to their tales of lust and infidelity,
to their proud lies, one after another,
their lies and schemes and smug triumphs.
Then, long past the setting of the moon,
they drift back to me with dainty bags of gold,
one by one,
wanting their fortunes told,
or potions to transfix neglectful lovers,
or charms against the spells of others...
I listen to them all, one by one,
and I take their gold
and give them gris-gris bags and amulets
and charred puffs of parrot feathers and lynx fur...
They leave my shop wrapped darkly in their cloaks,
full of vital spirit once again,
armed against their enemies.
And I, Marie LeVeau, their voodoo queen,
move their gold into the hands of teachers
that my people of the levees
and the slave hovels
might arm themselves in secret
with that most precious source of life,
the knowledge of words...
Somewhere in my soul,
the mother of us all is smiling, smiling...

Caput Mortuum

(to the Brothers of Cosmopolitan #125)

Deadhead.

Full of impulses, thick with its own thoughts,
thick with itself:

"Jacques de Molay, thou art avenged!"

In the roasting, as his eyes and nipples
crisped,

he had a dream:

Baphomet's black face floated in a sky streaked
magenta and purple,

his eyes of many stars became a carousel
and Ferris wheel, wheeling,

and walking along the strand barefoot,

his toes sucked by the cold, wet sand,

"I am Hugh Payne," he said without lips,

"There is Saracen blood in me,
and blood of all Enemies.

I am the comfort of the womb,

and the silent tomb. Only the stars
stir where I am."

In the whirling carousel and Ferris Wheel

I saw the echo of a froth of stars,

ancient

stars not yet wrung dry of heat,

not yet shrunk dry obsidian, philosophers' stones.

Some kind of cosmic head...

John talked to locusts

while Jesus ate with sinners

and drank wine with the brides.

The Emerald City

But, Dorothy, you're not in Kansas anymore.
You're in the lair of the Wicked Witch
and she has ball-gags and ankle-cuffs and nipple-clips for you to wear.
And, funny thing, Dorothy, you're starting to enjoy it
because the Wicked Witch isn't out to kill you,
just tame you down enough so you're lots of fun to be with.
And, as we speak, the airdrop of thousands of tons of ritalin and prozac
on Emerald City has begun and there'll be no place
to run anymore.
"Thus," [the Wizard speaks] "democracy was always a long shot.
Way back when the Greeks first conjured philosophy,
it made no sense: no one thought it would remain undegenerate
over the long haul. Still,
it flourished for the blink of an eye
and now it's left up to us once again
to prove the doubting Sages right."

And what is Emerald City without sunglasses, anyway?

Parable of the Sphinx and the Phoenix

There are those who would demean old fables
by contending they're just stories
told for the seduction of the very young.

This bespeaks a cynicism, often fashionable,
which, for better or for worse,
we no longer share.

Perhaps that is the reason one night,
amidst a dream of luxurious debauch,
there arose the mythic Sphinx in billows of cloud.

The creases of its ancient eyes
betrayed a history of sights seen
and deeds done unparalleled in all time's welts.

As the wise beast approached,
immense, smelling of sand and summer brick,
I left the confines of the harem,

and the security of my retinue,
to challenge it
with upraised hand:

"Noble Sphinx," I cried out,
"you who have seen and done so much,
tell me what lies at the crux of this dream we call life!"

The beast stretched in contemplation,
shaking from its ragged hide
countless misty shreds of cloud.

At that moment it seemed to me
even wiser for its silence
and the slow wheeling of its gaze,

which, like the Great Bear at midnight,
disdains all mortal curiosities
in throes of divine rapture.

then, to my amazement, there flew
from atop the great beast's haunches
a gaudy bird of scarlet, purple, gold,

a rainbow bird, as relentless in its plumage
as in its flight back and forth upon the
ancient, ragged hide.

It preened the fur of prehistoric dust,
of timeworn marble motes
hewn from native stone
when Nimrod's tower
challenged the immensity of God
and was consumed in oblivion.

And while the bird's kisses consoled the silent paragon,
its fluted song drifted off the beast
like shreds of cloud:

"Though I have passed through countless lives,
through countless flames of ecstasy and birth,
still, I find the comfort of your nearness,

your silent longing, your endless wandering,
a joy transcending flame and youth
and all such misbegotten vanities."

I listened and I kept my peace,
while beast and bird prowled the horizon
until dusk swallowed them into night

and the dream ended.

For now I had the answer to my question,
and it was love, that stuff of Sphinx and Phoenix,
and all the slow-wheeling stars.

The Creative Process

Thanks
to heartburn from
Mickey's spaghetti sauce
I awoke in the middle of the night,
after dreaming strange dreams,
and wrote
this poem.

Reflections Upon a Dream About Arthur Miller

"So, Arthur, what was it like
(and this is a very important question,
perhaps the most important question you've ever been asked)
that first time you fucked
Marilyn Monroe?"

We were both nervous.
I tried to get drunk
in order to submerge
the sublimity of it
in a giddy whirl.
I tried to tell myself
she was just another woman.
She matched me drink for drink
to make me comfortable.
But while she slowly stripped,
shyly, a bit awkwardly
(to my surprise),
I sobered up. I couldn't help myself.
And when she came over to me
naked
there was an apology in her eyes
that all she had to offer me,
the Great Writer,
was her woman's flesh.

Can you imagine?

On Sleeping Next to My Dog, Oscar

Sleeping next to my dog, Oscar,
is like sleeping next to a celibate uncle
who sells insurance:
he snores like Armageddon,
farts loudly,
and his paws smell.

I wouldn't have to put up with this at all
if, years ago,
I hadn't pitied his neglect
at the hands of others.

A Torah Within a Torah

(inspired by memories kindled at B'nai Chaim)

A Torah within a Torah:
the silver breastplate, a little ark set into it,
glittering silver under the recessed flood.

A Torah within a Torah:
like the circles of the Tree of Life in each of us,
or the glorious Shekinah stepping out of nowhere
into my Friday night.

A Torah within a Torah:
and Moshe hurled the sacred tablets
fullknowing they'd not be holy again
until picked up, chip by chip,
after 40 years wandering in the desert.

A Torah within a Torah:
that Abraham saw the blade pierce Isaac's heart
much like that which pierced Ishmael's heart on being sent away,
and the vision slew him, propelling his soul to heaven,
where the seraphim, six-winged, showed him the vision of the glory of Israel,
and two golden cherubs breathed him back to life
to pick up that dagger and raise it high over his son's throat.

A Torah within a Torah:
they never told me, then, these great stories:
I could have been a pagan, a Taoist, a Buddhist,
for all I knew then of my people's heart.

A Torah within a Torah.

September

(an ode in praise of being fired from a job that kept me subservient to an asshole)

I have been granted the finest portion of days,
under sharp blue skies,
amidst mottled forest-light,
surrounded by the clutching shadows of September,
to make myself worthy to hear
the laughter of angels and their hymns,
and to suck the hot coal of inspired speech
that my words might match my visions
and render proper homage to my God.

The Omega Point

(to Dr. Frank Tipler)

Job sifted ashes between his fingers.
He suddenly convulsed,
lurched forward, coughing,
spitting blood.
Then he heard the Voice and felt the Wind.
He buried his face in the ashes.
He heard the Words and heard between the Words;
he felt the Wind and felt beyond the Wind.
Suddenly, when all was silent,
as suddenly as a convulsion,
Job raised his face from the ash-heap
and spread his torn lips into a smile,
for between the Words and beyond the Wind
he had glimpsed the future of his race:

“You! You are Voice and You are Wind,
but back of you is Another,
that which molded voice and wind,
that which has no need to threaten,
no need to punish,
no need to prove Its worth,
no need of priests or the steaming blood of sacrifice...
Something... marvelous...
I know now, I see, I see...!”

And Job laughed for the first time in many months,
convulsively, laughed without respite.
And in that laughter Satan lost his bet
and stalked away.

Herakles' First and Last Poem

(in memoriam)

When I'm free,
I'm gonna run in a field with lots of smelly, juicy stuff so I can rub my face in it and afterwards not have to take a bath.

When I'm free,
there are gonna be birds and squirrels and mice that run just slow enough so I can catch 'em, for Christ's sake.

When I'm free,
there are gonna be plenty of bitches in heat, all lined up waiting for me, and I won't get stuck once.

When I'm free,
there won't be any more vets with soothing voices and gentle hands but when you wake up there's a part missing...

When I'm free,
there won't be anymore heartworm pills and fingers down my throat.

When I'm free,
there'll be the two of them, all laps and hands, so I can get held or tickled where it feels good any time I want.

Them.

They're gonna make a fuss -- I know it.

They're not like us.

We take a sniff and if it's dead, that's that.

We walk away.

Maybe, in tribute, we pee.

But they're gonna carry it around with them for the rest of their lives.

I've heard them talk.

I've watched their eyes get wet over that little furry thing in the litter box when it didn't move anymore.

This time it's me. That's gonna be rough.

After I'm free,
I wanna be born rich.
Maybe then I can take *them* in off the street and outta the cold. I wanna be born rich.
I deserve it.

The Witch

Lump me in some Poets of New England anthology, will you?
Not while the Devil has a better scheme for my fate,
or the Angel, determined to keep me dunning Civility
from the Mad Ones, flexing foreshortened tendons for the
Broken Ones, writing the manifestos of the Silent Ones...

Nicole ripped the pocket right off my hunter's vest today.
Irene pissed herself dry and wanted me to rub her poo-poo.
Stosh liked having his fuzzhead rubbed and hugged me...

I could go on. I could sing on, though
far away I hear the thunder of cannon and the drone of bombers,
but no, it's the slowing pulse of a starving child, but no,
it's the mad litany of prayers mumbled by a grandmother
over the untimely scorching of her seed, or no,
it's the throb of magma poised to raise, in a million years,
a new continent...

Often I lie face down on the forest floor,
my arms and legs outspread, sensing
the troubled shuttle of the Great Mother's heart
in the center of my being...

I could tell a story,
the tale of the witch in the octagonal room,
awaiting death by water,
a candle flickering seafoamed waves
on walls and floor and ceiling
from behind undulant green glass.
She has already felt her heart die;
now she waits for the silence of the voices,
then the embrace of electromagnetic nothing.
A fitting end to her feeble singing,
a world torn and littered in her wake...

Grant me the smell of cadavers and the dexterous fingers
to cleanse and anoint them
and weave their winding sheets.
Spare me the drool and puke and excrement
for that much life's too much...

In the Einstein equation is defined
the equivalence of matter and energy
and the Schwartzchild equation delineates
the barrier between the real and the unimaginable
and somewhere between the two
I dangle by my heel,
well-dipped by my immortal Mother,
well-dipped in water and fire...

I could, perhaps I should,
tell you the witch's story
but she lied about me being syphilitic
and lied about his ghost speaking to her
and lied about the castrator's blade whetted between her knees
and the teeth in her cunt
so I'll bury her story under a rock
and plug my ears with wax
against the ghost's wail
that I might dreadfully sail
home.

The Helen Cycle

(This cycle of poems is still under development. The premise is that Helen, later of Troy, now of Sparta, must choose a husband. Keep in mind that she is the daughter of Leda and the god, Zeus, who raped her mother in the guise of a swan. Leda laid twin eggs, and out of one Helen hatched, out of the other, Clytemnestra, both destined for tragedy. As the daughter of Zeus, she unites uncanny powers of perception with superhuman beauty. [Clytemnestra, on the other hand, seems not to have inherited any celestial attributes from her divine father, but that is the stuff of another tale...] I have chosen to regard Helen as a woman of spirit and swift intelligence. She chooses to use the nights available to her during the suitors' feast to bed down with each one secretly before making her choice. Inwardly, she senses that regardless of whom she marries, her destiny will carry her far from the lawful sheets of marital tranquility. But her natural curiosity compels her to learn all that she can about these great men, these "heroes," while she has the chance. These poems are the voices of these men addressing her after they have made love and, indeed, much about their character is conveyed. Note that I begin the cycle with Agamemnon, Helen's brother-in-law, a man not eligible to wed her as he is already married, and to her sister, Clytemnestra. Not only that, his younger brother is Menelaus, Helen's destined husband, and the political front-runner at the banquet. More than anything else, Agamemnon is a political man, a man for whom power is all. He cannot pass up the opportunity to enjoy the fleshly delights offered by this mystically beautiful woman, and the bonds of kinship he must break to do so are readily sacrificed. I have, in fact, constructed two versions of the same poem, both of them intriguing to me, even after many years.]

Agamemnon (1)

Helen, I saw the invitation in your eyes;
I'm no infatuated fool:
I make no mistakes about such things.
My brother has high hopes, young lady,
and my father's good will rides with him.
Mine, too.
I've come merely to see for myself
if Menelaus will be disappointed.
Not from the looks of it, I must say.
Don't turn frightened lamb eyes up at me;
shy but willing,
the most beautiful woman in the world,
hatched out of an egg, was it?
Your father a duck or a goose or some such?
Some folks will believe anything:
the masses need their fairy tales and lies.

Don't turn away...
I'll grant you that you do make other women
look like sows by comparison.
Since you've been in our palace,
Clytemnestra's not felt the full vigor of my royal...*presence*, shall we say?
Of course, I see beyond the mystique
to the flesh and blood
and what astounds me is that your beauty
is something palpable -
how can I say it? -
something that wraps your body in a cocoon
of madness...
If I hold out my hand to touch you, you see,
I seem to feel you inches before our flesh meets.
You are remarkable...

In any case, you hold my brother's heart
between your breasts.
He's moony over you.
He has no shame, but then
redheads aren't know for their
equanimity.
Perhaps you will bring him the confidence he needs
to rule this mob.
I'll be dead sooner than I'd wish
on some gore-stained field far away:
some men know their fates and have the courage
to look it, unflinchingly, in the eye.
Menelaus will need you.
I hope you'll consider that when making your choice.
A word to the wise...

in any event, here, this is for you:
Sostris, my clothier, made this robe to my specifications
just for you.
Note the purple brocade barely hides among its weaves
a bevy of peacocks.

The weight and texture derive from bits of jasper
and lapis lazuli and mother-of-pearl.
Feel it. Take it.
It's yours.
It's the only robe like it in the world,
the gift of a king.
I will watch you try it on,
watch your eyes as you study yourself, thus robed,
in the mirror.
And then I will make love to you.
I never promised Menelaus a virgin.
He'll have to settle for the most beautiful woman in the world.
I trust you'll have the good breeding
to keep your mouth shut about tonight.
It would be,
well,
impolitic,
if word of this got around...

Agamemnon (2)

My dear girl, you shame your sister.
She's a pig compared to you.
Her calves and belly are furred like the dark thighs
of a tarantula,
her movements lack grace,
she cannot eat kidney beans without blowing me out of my bed
with her foul wind,
and there's a swelling of her sex,
a sign of favor from the gods, she claims,
that sickens me every time she opens her legs...
I can well believe that you were hatched from a golden egg;
was Clytemnestra found under a rock?
Of course, I make scrupulous use of her
for ceremonial and breeding purposes only.
Ah, if Tantalos had only lived when I slashed open his shoulder
instead of shedding his best blood...
I've known heroes, real men,
who've lived through graver wounds.
He was weak in the guts, I suppose,
or wanted to be rid of your sister even more than I.
Tantalos, if your spirit floats anywhere around here,
I embrace you, brother-sufferer, and sincerely regret your death.
O, sincerely I regret your death...
The sweetness of taking my victim's woman to wife
blinded me just long enough.
Your revenge is complete, O Tantalos!
I envy you your billowy shade.

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You are skillful, I'll say that much:
I haven't sweated like this since the Games.
Go easy on Menelaus: he's just a boy.
He'll be maddened by a lover like you;
go off his feed for the better part of a week, I daresay.
I imagine most men would.
But not me.
Don't expect that from me, my dear.
I'm no boy, nor do I lack experience.
I smell a *femme fatale* at a hundred yards...

Now, as state priest I consider myself
a relatively pious man;
but your body and your tongue
are the strongest arguments
I've yet come across
for the existence of the gods.
Now, don't tell anyone I said that, my dear:
I'll deny everything.
I want you to know that's how I feel, that's all.
I expect it will make you feel proud.

Helen! Helen!
Where am I?
Touch me --
I have dreamed such a dream:
an old king stood before me,
his brow smeared with wet ashes,
behind him a great walled city in flames.
I couldn't tell if his face was darker with ashes
or with sorrow and the burden of his years.
He meant that gesture to accuse me, I swear it!
That finger of his, pointing.
My finger to you, old man, damned by the gods!
And then I stood on the steps of the temple
my thoughts full of the entrails of beasts,
and I'm struck from behind
and collapse at the foot of the marble stairs:
my blood spills like wine from a daggered sack.
Helen, there was such pain...

Hold me, woman.
Your breasts next to my skin soothe my heart.
I never before realized how dark it is in these guest rooms.
There should be oil-lamps, more oil-lamps, there and there...
Sometimes a little light preserves sleep,
which shadows banish.
What stupid things dreams are.
Don't tell the elders I said that:
I'll deny every word.
Those old fools record their feeble senilities
on leaves of gold in the temple,
making the gods their excuse.
But the dreams of a king --
Come here, woman.
Hold me.

Aias

(Aias the mighty, the giant warrior. He was the biggest of the Greeks, his weapons huge, the stuff of legend. Yet he always managed to come in second. Achilles gained greater fame, Odysseus beat him in wrestling... Aias never seemed to be able to live up to his own expectations, often because one god or another intervened in his many trials and contests with a variety of hidden agendas. In the end, mighty Aias went mad and killed himself.)

Look, I'll tell you right up front:
just because I'm big and the others are scared of me
doesn't mean I know what to do with a woman.
You're the most beautiful woman in the world:
I can see that, now. It's not just a rumor.
Therefore, I suppose it's your destiny
that all your experiences be superlative.
The most beautiful woman in the world
doesn't take out the garbage or clip coupons
or make love to an oddity with knees
as big as discuses,
and who lacks an elegant tongue.
Something in your eyes, however, says you want me
and I'm confused.
I'm afraid it's nothing more profound
than curiosity about what a man my size
will feel like inside you,
wrapped all around you.
Don't get me wrong:
if that's the case, so be it.
I'll do my best to please you.
But I beg you, Helen, don't condemn m
with your expectations.

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The priests have it in for me:
after what we've done, I owe you the full story.
You deserve to be warned.
They say I'm impious:
once I was overheard saying that
anybody can conquer an enemy with the help of the gods;
for myself, I'd prefer to do it alone.
That seems simple enough, and true:
where else does man's dignity lie?
But the priests are outraged against me for saying it,
and I fear they may be right:
the unpitying gods will dog my steps
with vexations. They'll steal my triumphs
right from under my nose.
If our relationship is to go any further,
I think it's only fair that you know this.

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You've made me giddy as a young boy
whose javelin's hit the mark for the first time.
I want to run howling to the elders,
wake them up in mid-snore, and all my friends,

and be told I can sit with the grown-ups
and drink my own cup of mead and honey.
If you should choose me,
I want you to understand that, as far as I'm concerned,
I'd not be marrying a mere woman
but embracing Beauty, herself.
I know you, of all people, understand my passion
for Beauty in the abstract.
Telamon sees me only as a warrior, a world-conqueror,
a political tool.
It bothered him no end when I, as a boy,
spent my afternoons in the armorer's hut
and watched the painstaking birth of swords and shields.
I couldn't explain what the perfection of lines
or the cunningly-endowed strength inherent in braids of metal
meant to me.
Beauty of form, beauty of function:
beauty in the abstract.
Telamon, terribly angry,
ordered me not to fraternize with the help.
I couldn't speak in my defense;
his poets have the words I need,
but they flatter with their skilled tongues, too,
and curse each other jealously,
and lure dull and brutish women into sordid affairs.
They jump at Telamon's fatted summons:
they'd never understand me.
But you would.
You wouldn't stop me from watching a sunset bloody the sky
or the sea's waves arouse the shore before a storm
with swollen, lewd and salty tongues...
You wouldn't tell me to cut it out
and act like a man.

Little Aias

(A cousin or something to the big guy. Always off to the side, burdened with a name that invited unenviable comparisons.)

I was counting on another night alone;
then I got your note.
I've been in love too long with the wrong woman.
Somewhere in this world a perfect woman waits
who won't be moody
or compare me to a friend or brother
or hold me accountable for the gleam
in the eye of the wind.
I tried love and gave it up
as a dirty deal.
And then I got your note.
No, it's not you, either, Helen.
Okay, we'll screw until we both see stars,
if that's really what you want,
but you're not the one for me.
A man should never be poorer than his wife
or uglier.
I sailed here to get away from my mired nest.
That's all.
I did, however, bring you a gift, Helen:
a brocade robe, empurpled with the scrapings of oyster shells,
and, lurking in the folds of jasper bits
and flecks of pearl,
are peacocks, Helen. See?
Sostris, the tailor, told me it was
the only one like it in the world...
She liked this robe.
At least that's what she said
when she was in a good mood...

Odysseus

(Ah, Odysseus, the man of many wiles: he never could resist telling profitable, if outrageous, lies.)

No doubt, Helen, this night of love
has amply restored my vigor,
depleted as I was en route to this party.
For, in case you haven't already heard this tale
or have been misinformed as to its particulars,
let me simply say that y shipmates and I were attacked by an immense bird
as we sailed from rocky Ithaca, a bird
with rainbow plumage which, spying my
purple cloak, did pluck me off the steersman's bridge
and carry me among the clouds
to circle at last in descent toward its fledglings.
Four hungry heads with savage beaks
the size of a man's thigh did bob and squawk
and utter shrill cries of hunger mingled with delight
that their noble parent had provided so nobly for them,
bearing in her talons a Greek prince.
What horror, Helen, did this scene provoke in me;
and the stench of the carrion-strewn nest
almost cost me the light of my eyes
and my body's breath, weakened as I was
by the giddy flight. It was then that my benefactress,
most noble Athena, did inspire my soul with a stratagem
and my body with the strength to carry it out:
I squirmed like a well-oiled wrestler,
freeing myself from the talons yet clinging
to the rainbow-feathered legs,
and hoisted myself most painfully from feather to feather
until I reached the bird's broad back,
and then I unclasped my purple cloak
which had made me seem such a tempting morsel
and cast it over the bird's head like a falcon's hood.
Though I had to call upon all of Athena's magic strength,
I held the cloak in place against the wild winds
and the bird's irate gyrations.
Docile did that bird become and ruled by my hand.
Then it was my horsemanship came into play
as I guided the monster low upon the water
until my ship and crew came into view
and I leaped with eagerness into the sea.
The bird flew off shrieking, overjoyed
at no longer being blind, and I gave thanks
upon my ship to the noble goddess, Athena,
for my salvation. As often, you see, as mighty Poseidon
wreaks upon me and my people the torments
of his anger (for we are seamen and have seamen's ways
and know first-hand that god's malice
and caprice which no amount of sacrifice
and ritual can blunt), does noble Athena
protect us and provide for us the strength
and cunning to transform defeat into triumph.
Thus did I arrive here with a full and bursting heart
from Athena's touch and presence.
And now, tonight, by granting me the grace

of your soft body and lover's skills,
I am, as it were, completely satisfied.
Thus, my chagrin, Helen: for a man
such as myself is most ill at ease
when confronted by such overwhelming satisfaction.
I am a man of the sea and its mysteries
and, though Poseidon has for his godly purposes
sworn himself my foe, I am driven
to bear Athena's banner all my life
in direct challenge to his enmity.
Consequently, by dawn tomorrow my men and I
shall set sail for rocky Ithaca:
there a maiden waits, who,
though not half so beautiful as you,
will leave my soul its precious wanderlust
and make for me a fine queen.
Besides, I'm not unaware of the nightly visitations
during this festival of courtship
and have seen for myself tonight
that I am not your first lover
nor would I likely be your last...
Believe me, Helen, I say this without reproach:
I respect your courage and independence
in the same way that I prefer the worship of Athena
to that of her patriarchal uncle;
yes, I admire your warrior's cunning
and daring ways, for I see you are Athena's true daughter,
as I am her son; yet, it is not such a one
that Ithaca requires for a queen,
at least not while I, with my wandering ways,
am suffered by the Fates to be her king.
Kiss me then, Helen, and bid me farewell,
for this life's dawn is both too rosy and too brief
to becloud with prudent admonitions
or dreary, drawn-out words of cautious commonsense.

Aias and Helen: a Dialogue

(So intriguing did I find this situation that I expanded my images, briefly.)

Helen: Are you enticing me to wed your cousin?

Aias: Why, no ma'am...!

Helen: Then learn, young warrior, that a man should never
speak too highly of a rival
when in a woman's bedroom.

Aias: I -- I didn't think --
O, be assured I want to marry you with all my heart
for you are beautiful,
the most beautiful, I'm told,
and I love beautiful things.
Telamon says I have a streak in me
that must be gotten rid of.
When I returned the winner from a tourney,
I went off by myself to a hidden pond
in woods behind our palace,
to rest and play my flute.
I love the beauty of sound as well as sight
and played "with feeling,"
as the musicians call it,
until the birds fell silent
and the tree frogs kept their peace.
Even as a child I could cover all the stops
with my big hands. My lungs,
from warfare, have the strength to sustain
the most delicate notes.
O, well...
Telamon surprised me and, by Herakles,
he was pissed.
I endured his diatribe against troubadours
and jugglers and festival geeks
and, in the end, surrendered my flute.
But you are the most beautiful woman,
aren't you?
You, above all, must understand
how beauty compels us to be other than ourselves.
People take one look at me and gasp,
and whisper, "See! A mighty warrior,
his knees are as big as discuses!"
My people thus worship me, but only as they worship
that boneheaded Tibulo, the wrestler,
for his thick arms and the way he growls
and the way he can shatter a man with his foot.
I'm not like that, and that is why Destiny
will side with my cousin -- sorry.
I almost forgot.
Anyway, I'd learn to love you, and quickly, too,
for you can see beyond my bulk
and know that even warriors can appreciate
beauty, like any poet.

Helen: Know this, too, young warrior,
young lover of beauty,
that in a woman's bedroom
there is no beauty but hers.
Not sounds of flutes,
nor starry nights,
nor seaweed flushed with rain:
they are but accessories to the woman
in whose bed you wish to lie;
they are but stale metaphors to futilely
accentuate the beauty that is hers
and hers alone,
the ghostly pale stuff of poets.
Now, take off your cloak of Tyrian dye,
and unclasp the lionheads that do not growl,
that I may teach you the special beauty
of a woman,
O mighty Aias,
O dutiful warrior
and lover of beauty.

Sarah's Last Testament

You sold me twice, Abraham,
 to save your own life.
First, in the palace of the Pharoah
 where I learned to revel in my flesh:
How could I help it,
 given the sophistication of the court
and Pharoah's ardor?

Then, as an old woman,
 blessed by God with such loveliness that,
at an age when I should have been a crone,
 You drove Abimelech to conspire my rape...

That was when, I confess, Abraham,
 my years of guilt over tormenting Hagar
just to hurt you
 melted off these old shoulders
and I grew ready to die.
 I wanted to speak these words to you
and relieve myself of some of the bitterness
 standing between me and our Lord
but I never could.

So I leave them as a written testament
of my woman's heart.

1

the end of creativity;
the neighbors,
Sloth and Inertia;
the hovering eyes of the owl;
the childish retreat
and the terror of children:
parade before my eyes
in this poem that was to be
of Beauty

2

incantations for a midwinter's night,
breathings and blessings before the light.
arise, ghost, make off with my dreams,
my fairest illusions,
my skin of screams;
confusion invoke in a company of players,
and in my right hand, a tambourine:
tread tide and time in sediment layers,
congeal the spirit world unforeseen.

3

Despair

I'll do this by daylight
real poetry
gut words:
show myself I'm no sham...
but the fibers will close in
the eagerness;
the clarity will disintegrate;
and I'll debate with my will,
my faith,
and deter myself

4

Americans are conditioned
on mental plates
to signs and objects
of varying forms
to elicit peace of mind
and relieve anxiety.
Like the 3 Stooges

5

a memo on the lyric art
of Conceit:

(1)

Tackle the problem

(2)

Be assured, yours as well as another's

(3)

Pick up a fucking piece of paper and write;

or you'll die

* * *

(And now:
La Nausee)

6

I have been burned
as in a brazier;
I have endured
the baptism of the artist;
I have grown into myself
(the animosity of taste
overcome by the free reign
of genius)

7

Alone with my errors.
The handwriting changes.
The inner light's still at it.
(The Beacon: the Colossus)
This new year
this festival of Janus
has thrust me naked
before the honed spear of light.
The confusion dissipates
and the vision is a
kaleidoscope
(finely tinted stones
bejeweling the light)

8

the self-criticizing factor
always aligned
and alight
Argos-eyed eyeing,
seeing what must be seen;
seeing the terror and the hesitation
and wiping it out;
seeing the circles of the evil;
feeling the density
the complexity
the hideous embarrassment
at the loss of memory;
wiping the plates clean;
feeling terror united
with love and beauty
like the light of the Mystic Rose
is of colors
(I'll never see...

9

some chemical residue remains
trashing me up,
giving me freedom
in my filth
an honest voice (at last)
a nodding head
manicured beneath a boater
the meadowgrass bend
like emerald stained glass
(I learned from that
on many level (honesty,
for one)

10

It's but a breath
between insights;
the thoughts of the ancients
jostle
in a solemn line
a disciplined freedom
(provoking a horrible rush
of blood)

11

the player in me
poseur by seconds
flashes of images
bookpictures of knights and lords
in stained glass;
I would be all those
but my preferred world is poetry
a safe world
to which I've found a key
(the pain...)

12

The disciplined poet
teaches the poem
to arrive
with panache.

13

I assemble the images;
I make claim to no more.
If they rouse thought...
I don't play with blocks of wood
or splashes of color.
I trade in fear.
I carve amulets.
I abuse myself.

14

"Scary, this real stuff"
and the poem is born
and the creature howls
its lies and postures
and the darkness assumes a hue:
the fluids of my chemical thoughts
break upon the bloodvessel shore
washing, cleansing,
arousing a great light
as Reason progresses.
And a new poetry
is born.

15

Slowly the words rise
like fiercely boiling water
under a lid of ice.

16

The child, Homer,
teases a little girl
with a stick.

His eyes,
not yet blind,
see where to hit.

17

Facade

It is the ritual:
we march in procession
our shadows enflamed
upon the rock walls;
we dance
we pirouette
without tongues
without memory
of our mistakes;
we dance in frenzy
and ejaculate our confusion
to the still sparkling stars:
eyes of Mind
shimmering
out of the darkness.

18

The Ram

Sleep rises from the darkest
of wells
reflecting the silhouette
of the inquisitive Ram
looking down
framed by
moonlight.
I call to sleep
with a languid gesture
of my hand.

I left the smell of gardenias
far behind.
Beyond, walls of roses
beckon.
Will it ever end,
this wandering?
Are there no particles of thunder
to fall at my feet?
Afterwards, the sky is magenta,
wheeled with stars.
I am tired and fear the night.
Then, of course, the darkness whelps
bright diamonds to still my weary stride
with their beauty.
Glinting beyond their light,
my eyes,
large as galaxies,

await me.

The Loon

(for Fontala)

The loon flies overhead
following the lake, north.
Above, the sky is gray-white,
like old silver just tarnishing.
The calls of cowbirds, jays and orioles
jostle among the leaves.
It's spring and three planets
whisper among themselves like old cronies
in a bar. Their conjoined light
leaves us awestruck, seeking portents.
From the heavens to those moist dark places
where the slugs roost before invading the tomato plants,
the Totality enthralls -
even given Man's penchant for sin
and Woman's willingness to abet him -
and, once more,
it's spring.

Masseuse

Let us be somber, you and I.
Try for a moment to forget that plane of joys out there,
that realm of D minor triads which urges the soul to weep
from excess beauty. Forget,
if you can, for a moment, the astral excursions,
the cornucopoeia of intense white light,
the old gray men in the shadows,
waiting to share their wisdom and evil.
Remember, if only for a moment,
when my anguish touched your strong fingers
and my need flew into your veins,
filling your light eyes with incandescent blood.
I felt your healing powers - O that my words
could flood your soul, spill one upon the other
in their haste to make you hear me - I felt
your chameleon lives gather as one Life,
and pass their wisdom, their tonic self-assurance,
their subtle intonations along the arc of my spine,
teasing my chakras into fresh evanescence.

For this relief, my thanks, Bright Lady.
Already you have entered my dreams
and filled the moon's pale visage
with your light eyes. You are Egypt, Bright Lady,
ageless as the Sphinx, innocent amidst your ancient wisdom,
mute and bewildered that each bright day
dangles the freshly burnished sundisk
to tease and thrill your child's self
with baubles and penny-whistle winds.

I will be touched by you again
and surrender myself to your incantations
that, indeed, new poetry will blossom in my fallow soul.
Even thus, tonight, my astral center,
grounded to the fulcrum heat at the center of the Earth,
flies to your side with gifts innumerable,
rare stones suited for a high priestess's breastplate,
precious metals hammered and tuned
to secret lyrics taken from the distant night owl's cave,
rare gifts of wonder heaped upon you
in appreciation...

The Death of Peregrinus Proteus

(a sophist of Elis who thought to attract a paying crowd at the Games by promising to set himself on fire, only to find himself forced to make good on his promise)

Mock me through the flames:
I see your howling faces
egging me on.
There's fame
and the giant specters
of gods
to embrace my spirit.
The victors nod their triumph
to the adoring crowd.
The olive wreath rests
upon the threshold of the temple.
Before my nostrils flared
with the scent of burnt flesh,
summer kissed the air.
I've done with the Games,
the mockery,
the wandering:
O men of Elis
breathe deeply of my soul,
my scorched flesh.

The Wealthy Poet

Habinnas, you happy man!
Come, slave;
your master waits:
his glass is dry.
Hah!

The party's at full roar:
Krista and Kyle nod to each other
over their wine;
their breasts tremble;
they make lewd tongues.
Hah! See it!
I'd like to watch them at it,
those two women.

Habinnas, you poet!
What a crowd of delights!
Simple food but plenty,
cooked to taste,
spartan,
the proper stuff for strength,
for stamina (you lecher, Hah!),
for wisdom: brain food.
There's the pale sheath of sky,
the sun's whitegold on the water,
the wind gently teases sighs
from stalwart trees.

And later
at the Bacchic hour
there'll be music
and dance
and the dry smoke
to tease the brain.
Hah!

All is happiness
and joy
and Kyle and Krista
touching hands.

Therefore, Habinnas, why frown?
You
are the solitary
cloud
this day.
Can I beguile you with a song?
Perhaps a lewd dance
will amuse
you.
Hah!
You may as well dance and sing,
Hanno;
or not;
do whatever you wish.

My home is yours.
I am your Host.
All I ask is that you leave me
my frown.
It is my only treasure.

Take care, Hanno:
I've risen from a dream.
My eyes are as unclouded
as the sky you praise.
The world rushes to its
end
while we eat.
Words flake from my pen,
heartless,
dry as burnt wafer.
There is dust in my head
and dry smoke.

My past has risen, Hanno,
like a pale ghost.
The child I thought I was,
the child of might
and dreams,
of great faith,
of wise and somber
conquests:
I've been wrong, Hanno.
I've misremembered.
I saw him rise before me
weak and fearful
full of spite.
As I was then,
so am I now:
I've just recalled.

Your whitegold sun
can't change that.

Beauty and death
cling to the world's chariot,
accessible as the pale sky.
Their acquaintance is no great feat.

I want more:
I want the Creator's potent nod,
to mold,
to chronicle the surfeit of the earth,
to forge its treasure
with panache.
I want a place among those noble minds
who've gone before...

I'm not of their realm;
their circle of heaven is my distant star.
Cruelly,
I've been awakened.

Sing and dance, Hanno.
Make this day and night
the world's wake:
it spins to darkness.
My thoughts are dark.

Yet
while I pause,
there's the tease of metaphor:
a ram stares down at me
from the lip of a well.
Behind him is the full moon.

Dance and sing, Hanno.
It will soon be dark
and I'll be gone to sleep.
Hand me my cup, please.

Which?
The one heavy with almond froth.

It's time to drink,
still beneath the whitegold
sun.

A Walk with Poetry in the Connecticut Woods

You take a book of poems,
particularly Robert Frost,
and walk along the curving road,
and climb a steep sandy hill
sprouting with sedge and wildflowers
as the sun sinks.

Though the light dims,
the reading's easy
and soothes the eyes.

You speak the words to the trees and shadows,
send them softly across the slick water
of the cove
to the ears of the fisherman
who cocks his head and smiles
to himself.

The sound of your own voice,
dampened by the mist and remnant rain
sounds better than you thought.
No Welshman's tragic, noble tones,
the voice of kings,
but it will do.

Images of woods and farms
leap from the page,
spawning breadth of soul
in salmon-haste;
the words tumble from you lips.

Mary and Warren debate
Old Silas' fate.

Amidst the joy of craft and nature merged,
darkness and mosquitoes
descend.
The Lord's largess you so heatedly uphold
is but a metaphor misread.

Woods and meadows outspread
in all directions
are not there for the taking.
Not trinkets for the citified plunderer
to hang around his banker's neck:
the mosquitoes and the darkness
see to that.

Like amulets, the woods and meadows must be wooed;
readiness,
assimilation of warring elements,
fasting,
prayer,
discipline,
serenity:
the woods and meadows must be wooed
like amulets carved for prying gods
on cold and stony tombs.

Master Wu

Master Wu considers the Vagrant through heavy-lidded eyes, as if almost asleep. He breathes the breath of the rose petal.

Master Wu considers the Vagrant through heavy-lidded eyes.

Master Wu studies the Vagrant through half-closed eyes.

The Vagrant studies Master Wu.

The Vagrant wonders why Master Wu seems to sink backwards into the bare wall behind him, effortlessly, becoming the bare wall yet not for a moment being the bare wall, not for a moment.

Master Wu breathes the breath of the rose petal.

Men near death know the breath of the rose petal when they are without fear.

Men in the delirium of ecstasy breathe the breath of the rose petal.

Unbidden, the wind-stones clatter like tuned bones.

The Vagrant feels no trace of moving air on his cheek or the back of his hand, yet the wind-stones hanging over Master Wu clatter like tuned bones.

Knowledge of the breath of the rose petal cost Master Wu dearly.

To breathe the breath of the rose petal, Master Wu permitted time's flame to shrink, and char, and wizen him until his flesh was dry and shiny as rice paper.

If the Vagrant presses the tip of his forefinger to Master Wu's cheek, he will leave behind a dim smudge like a new apprentice carelessly touching rice paper.

It is arrogant of this frail old man to think he can absolve himself of space and time and sink into the pale ochre wall, muses the Vagrant.

There is arrogance and mystery and cunning and ten thousand other things in this old man with pale ochre skin, muses the Vagrant.

Master Wu is crisp with dim flame, muses the Vagrant.

Master Wu shrugs off his shoulders the fragrance of blue lotus and moist olive like a warrior his bloody cloak.

If the Vagrant presses his finger to Master Wu's flesh, he fears he will touch a dead man, or nothing, or a dying star.

Master Wu lives where the great city is darkest, where winds trickle but do not blow, where the third eye of God merely blinks.

In the deepest trench of the great city lives Master Wu, for he is the last throb of the great city, the jade pillar of the great city.

Master Wu lives where the lights and the noise and the squalor of the great city dance with the darkness and the silence and the beauty.

"Am I welcome, then, to learn from you?" inquires the Vagrant after a long silence.

Will that old man return from the wall to answer me, muses the Vagrant, he has fallen so far away he can barely be seen.

Shudder, sun, tremble, moon and Master Wu is silent.

The sun has watched over the thousand things and the moon has unearthed the ten thousand things, yet still the Vagrant awaits Master Wu's return from the wall.

And the Vagrant discovers he is with Master Wu in the wall, and they float on a pale ochre sea surrounded by the vague fragrance of blue lotus and moist olive.

Terribly afraid, the Vagrant casts about for an escape from the maze but he cannot move and grows more afraid and angry.

The Vagrant feels the hot breathing of ten thousand things on his cheek and the backs of his hands.

Master Wu's flesh hardens under the dry, hot breathing of the ten thousand things.

And the Vagrant dissolves in the pale ochre mist, crying silently, clutching the air, afloat like a cork on an ocean.

Master Wu returns from the wall and the fragrance of blue lotus.

Have the wind-stones clattered, has Master Wu breathed the breath of the ten thousand things, has there ever been a Vagrant in the abode of Master Wu?

His vast silk robe is orange, unadorned with the flaming eyes of the dragon.

His thin feet are bare and tucked between his calves and his thighs.

Master Wu is alone with the ten thousand things.

Have the wind-stones clattered? Like tuned bones?

A Love Poem

Stuff for me,
stuff for thee;
the distracting sounds
make it somehow easier
to distinguish
between them;
I've felt the boundary
of self-exposure;
I've been through the madala,
passed through the vortex;
I'll keep my privacy,
not to intrude my terror
on your placid mind

Eschatology

We would have endured
but for the germ of the flame
that spoke with forked tongue,
saying we are more than beasts;
we shall burn like a spark,
rapidly,
shining a bright white light
(gorilla eyes looking at the moon)

The World

(written immediately after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan)

We are allotted just
a portion of wisdom
by a just God.
And then we sleep
until the lights are kindled
by terror
by anguish
by the grimace of WWII...
Hush, now...
the games are in progress:
Carter looks over his shoulder
at the bust of Kennedy
and the Ambassador
is recalled....
We are such dross in this world,
scurrying like ants,
throwing life away,
denying honor and justice,
nodding
at platitudes

Antichrist

The moron in chains
doesn't know what he's lost
nor cares that he has no future.
The shackles of his deformity
keep him locked in a private hell,
bewildered by cloud-like presences
that whisper tales of heaven.
We have all viewed that moron
striding across the empyrean,
his chains rattling cold stars
from their dark thrones.

Lost Love

Where is the silver cord that holds the Moon to the Earth?
It has bound the umbilicus of my astral body
in its undulant, arabesque mesh,
and keeps me prisoner somewhere between
madness and enlightenment.
I tremble, tormented neither by cold nor heat,
but, instead, bewildered by my solitude.
My ghostly flesh walks the Earth
as if strolling through fields of chrysanthemum and peony:
dear comrade,
don't waste your days wondering why I've left you.
Other flowers shall cool your brow.

The Fugitive

There's that nausea of the soul...
It feels like when your cheeks pucker green,
and your hands shake, and your gut
wants to cut right through you
with a blunt stiletto.

You're alone, man.
Can't fight it,
can't hide in a garbage can
or under a cardboard box,
can't hang yourself from silk straps
coyly crying, "Mercie! Mercie!!"

You took in friends like stray cats
and you're still alone.
You played it straight
and you're still alone.
You gave more than took,
and you're still alone.

Jeremiah of Chelm, you come outta there!
Hidin' in that skull-shaped cave
won't do you no good.
You been seen, Jeremiah!
Can't get away from us now.
We've got our claws set for you,
dipped in poison.

Shekinah

She rises out of green mist,
surrounded by the music of mandolins.
She looks neither to the right
nor to the left,
certain, as she is, that my eyes
cannot turn away from her.
She is beautiful,
and I want her with the wholeness
of my being.
She reaches for my hand
and all my terrors, like frigate-birds,
flock to the ends of the earth...
I am empty, without pain,
without lust, without
regrets...

A Geophysicist Lectures the Essenes on the Mythogenesis of the Semitic Cultus

“...Item 3: That Moses’ speech impediment
derived from the fact that
he was, after all, a rebellious Egyptian
of the lesser nobility
and didn’t know a word of Hebrew;
that Aaron, who wasn’t related to him
at all but was a Hebrew activist,
served him as translator
to the Hebrew slaves, and as point man
for the activist Hebrew wing
that spearheaded the plunder
and led the escape to Mt. Sinai.
Thus, one can readily understand how Aaron,
with his kin, retained control of the wandering tribes
in spite of his seminal involvement with the Golden Calf
debacle.

Item 4: the plunder of the Egyptians:
if not for plunder, the Midianites could not have been
induced to leave their hillsides and join the stranger, Moses’,
rebellion. Surely, they cared nothing
about Hebrew servitude or the monotheistic cult of Aten
to which Moses turned for vengeance
following his exile. Nor could any such artifact
as the Golden Calf or the Ark have been built
by a wandering tribal folk following centuries of servitude
without cunning pillage and flight.
This plunder became mythogenetically translated into aspects
of the ten plagues:
locusts, frogs, waters of blood, death of the firstborn, etc.

Item 5: the eruption of Sinai:
the plague of darkness and the pillar
of cloud by day and fire by night can, of course,
best be understood in terms of a seismic event.
Those portions of the pursuing Egyptian forces killed or deterred
by the eruption became transformed mythogenetically
into an army swallowed up by the Red Sea. Those Midianites
and Hebrews killed became the faction of Dathan,
swallowed up by the earth for counter-revolutionary activities.

Finally, Item 6, and then we'll close for the day:
the translation of this seismic activity into
I Will Be Who I Will Be, a deity
awaiting definition, to be revealed
only after years of wandering and trials,
allowing Aaron's faction to reconcile
his power as High Priest with the astounding seismic event
that snatched Hebrew and Midianite victory
from the jaws of defeat by the pursuing forces of
Egypt... Who could have predicted this turn
of events? Yet, such events lie
at the very heart of myth and dogma,
and both Moses and Aaron knew well enough
how to make use of it.

Are there any questions? Then we'll begin again,
tomorrow."

And the dark-eyed scribes placed their notes
in clay pots
and carried them to the inmost recesses
of the caves,
never again to see the light of day.

Father

Where is his touch
 now that night gathers
 and I learn to my amazement
the stars are cold tears?

Where is his smile
 when dawn's sun on the horizon,
 pink with chagrin,
can't seem to burn through the clouds?

Where is his soft voice,
 modulated with compassion
 and a lonely tremor
betraying his weak soul?

I risk everything on the throw of the dice
 that is my life,
 heedless of the vigerish
that cost him his heart...

Love, on a Bad Day

Her every footfall frightens me
when she's in a passion.
Hatred, regret, despair swirl my glass mind,
seeking words.

Goosebumps chafe against my jeans
in the cold, in the wind,
in the pale eye of the winter sun...

It's taken me a year to walk the sandhills,
leaning on my augur's rod,
breathing in the scent of winter.

It's filled my blood, this scent,
and mixed, at last, with the scent
of Manhattan's greybrick winter,
the scent of gusts off the Hudson...

At times like these I wish I'd gone
that other route:
devastate my days with pointless chores,
my nights lulled of ambition.

I'd be like other men
in the vapor of their days...

I can say with zadik's truth, I love her more;
that our love ages like fine wine.
But the next hour finds all that was sublime
vanishes in the pale light of the winter sun.

I'm ashamed of my submission,
I, who boasted to conquer all:
the dogstar lifts its leg
over my dignity.

My God is rarefied unto uselessness.
How I wish that pagan fires lit the hills
and that in the flash of lightning
I saw the spear of Zeus and his rage...

My God can't lift me from despair
for He is and He isn't.
He is lost among the fringe of galaxies
and in the kernel of my soul.

His omniscient absence makes a roller-coaster of my life.
He's a concept without flesh
and I'm a carnivore:
I need blood to drink.

I dream of a woman whose legs wrap my waist,
voracious, bacchanal,
who finds me Zeus descending
in a splash of gold.

Had even Romeo and Juliet, that star-crossed pair,
but lived and prospered,
grown soft amid cold sheets,
they'd lose the name of poetry.

It's the petty things in life that kill:
the phone bill checked and re-checked;
an urgent need for weather reports;
quarrels at the packie over small change...

We're too much in each other's eye.
She's seen me as both wizard and buffoon,
to the detriment of us both:

I'm just Flesh and Will.

Incarnations

(dedicated to Bob Herman)

1

It's coming back to me now:
after millennia of sleep, my quiescent soul
awakens, yawns, stretches,
revealing to my benumbed sensibilities
a progress of lives lived, birth to death,
life upon life breaking upon my inner vision
like waves thrashing Mt. Tai...

2

...and when Siddhartha,
known among his subjects as Prince Gautama,
left the palace precincts,
he happened upon me where I sat by the side of the road,
a leper,
a paragon of moral and physical decrepitude.
He took one look at me, sniffed the air distastefully, and --
his eyes wide with amazement --
said softly, "Dear God,
I had no idea such wretches as this
crawl upon the earth."
For my part, this encounter was less fruitful --
I hoped at least for a heaping bowl of rice
from such a sleek, well-oiled young gentleman,
but was dismayed to see him turn away, rapt in thought,
only to return in garments slightly less disreputable than mine,
and make his way through the world
on a pilgrimage to parts -- and for purposes -- unknown.
Well, what's one bowl of rice more or less
to one whose corroded limbs and features
dropped pustules of useless flesh
to the moist, dark earth?

...I watched Socrates stand guard barefoot
 in the fresh snow.
 I dared not approach him for he was deemed wise,
 a philosopher of some merit, it was rumored,
 and I was a simpleton with boggled eyes
 and a pernicious limp
 who followed the camp to run errands
 and carry cumbersome loads upon my warped back
 while soldiers of good birth polished their armor.
 I spoke only a rare word or two,
 invariably mispronounced,
 and wondered why such a noble philosopher,
 a man admired by his comrades
 as much as I was scorned,
 a man who spoke whole sentences
 and paragraphs with all the precise beauty
 our noble Greek tongue would allow,
 would choose to stand barefoot in the snow.
 How stupid I must have been
 to spend so much time that winter
 trying to piece together the shreds and fragments of my sandals,
 ignoble things found by the roadside
 and held together by rancid goathide thongs.
 They were certain to fall apart
 whenever some foot soldier whose duffel bag I carried
 flogged me for being too slow to march
 or mute or formless in speech
 and I'd try to run,
 my splayed feet at cross-purposes...
 Such, I thought, is the nature of a philosopher --
 how blessed with brains that he could be
 so strong in his mind
 that the weaknesses of the flesh --
 the cramps and twinges and throbbing burns
 that drove me mad --
 were like nothing to Socrates.
 Indeed, they were sought by him as tests of endurance
 and measures of his capacity to transcend
 all feebleness of thought and flesh.
 I did not survive that winter campaign.
 But I will always remember the measure
 of those bare footprints in the snow
 next to mine: he, though we did each possess ten toes,
 his did not drip blood.

...When this man came up to me outside the Temple
 and, instead of dropping a coin in my cup,
 he gave me my eyes, I ran like a madman
 throughout the city to proclaim the miracle
 and the divinity of that gentle Voice and Touch.
 And then, when he was brought to trial
 and scorned by the mob
 in favor of Barrabas,
 I literally had to shimmy down a drainpipe
 to throw myself in front of Pilate
 and plead that flogged man's cause,
 only to be well-whipped for my efforts.
 I will freely admit that the only time
 I wished myself once more blind
 was when I saw him that day --
 but enough of that.
 I left Jerusalem forever that afternoon,
 beaten, spat upon, bruised by thrown stones...
 Barabbas left too, and for the same hills;
 yet, he did so only to look back and keep watch,
 percolating his hatred and rage
 by feeding his eyes with images of Roman imperialism.
 I never looked back once, but wiped the dust
 of that town off my feet and kept walking,
 refusing to desecrate the sacred gift he had given me
 by bearing further witness to that man's torment
 or to the unbridled cruelty of God's
 most noble species of animal.

...I served in the army of Germanicus,
 and soldiers with one arm were not uncommon.
 I lost my sword-arm for my country's cause,
 and, being unsuited for civilian beggary,
 I stayed with the troops, learning
 through stubbornness and rage
 to wield a sword with my left hand.
 Then one day my fellows and I
 spied a vast army north of us, heading west.
 They watched us, too, from atop their horses --
 savage beasts, splendid with fur and fury,
 an amazement to all of us, Romans though we were,
 that such beasts could be bridled by the hand of man --
 and we recalled the tales we had heard from the barbarian tribes
 about an army from lands so far the east
 that the name of Rome and her Emperor were unknown,
 a race so fierce that, for want of other nourishment,
 they would open their horses' veins
 and drink raw blood.
 Thus we passed each other over the next several weeks,
 the two greatest armies in the world.
 As we passed and watched,
 I knew our destinies had not yet crossed
 but inevitably would as the future creeps up on us,
 demanding of us all a certain readiness,
 a certain capitulation to the unknown.
 My new sword-hand hung limply at my side
 as I realized that there was no place for one-armed men
 in an army that drinks its horses' blood.

...Orioles, hummingbirds -- once, I knew such a springtime,
 filled with birdsongs and meadows splashed with sun.
 Even through the hellish din of that asylum,
 I heard that gentle springtime in my head,
 just as when at matins and vespers
 the sacred music drifted through the high narrow windows
 and, for the briefest moment, all of us lunatics
 paused in our gibbering and listened with delight.
 Where did that springtime go?
 Surely it was too pure and beautiful to have vanished forever.
 Other children in other times and places
 are right now being visited by that springtime,
 and for them, however briefly,
 there are orioles and hummingbirds
 and smiling sunlight splashed on meadows...

(epilogue)

There you have them -- a few voices
that once were loud in my soul
and are just now being heard again
for the Lord in His wisdom has so ordained it.
In this life I am strong and sound of limb,
and my mind -- but for a bout of petulance here and there --
works tolerably well.
Is it, then, a wisdom born of such voices
that brings me to these people and has me spend my days in deed and thought
among these reflections of my own past?
Surely other voices cry out to me
and they will one day have their due.
But for this life, this prolonged moment in God's Mind,
here is where I tilt the cup of love
and deeply drink to life
and all life's challenges
and all life's capacities.

The Emerald Cantic of Hermes

My dream had two components, intermingled:
first, we were in a rather elegant restaurant in NYC
(linen tablecloths, thick Victorian carpeting),
and a very old couple, very old,
were seated at a table,
unobtrusive and unnoticed
until the old man doubled-over silently
and pissed himself dry,
drenching his clothes,
spraying all over the tablecloth and carpeting,
creating quite a scene.
Oddly enough,
nobody in the restaurant was angry at the old man
or disgusted by what happened:
they just laughed at him,
broadly, teeth showing.
I recognized his wife, Mrs. Meyrowitz, who has appeared
in my poems.

The second component of the dream
involved getting to the restaurant:
I rode a bicycle, and on the bicycle with me
was an old couple, my wife's parents, I think,
(note, I'm not sure)
and my wife walked next to us,
keeping pace, on the sidewalk:
she was angry with me for slowing down,
for growing weaker and weaker
as we got to the restaurant,
and I reacted to her anger
with anger and resentment of my own,
that she was outlandishly unreasonable,
that I was, after all, pedaling with two old people
(*her* parents, most likely)
clinging to my bicycle
while she walked.
Yet out of my anger there obviously came
the strength to get the job done,
to push the three of us to the restaurant
so we could be there, comfortably seated,
in time to see the old man double-up
and piss himself dry.

Isn't this, then, just what a writer must confront
as preconditions of creativity:
1) the limitations of the body;
2) the implacable nagging of a driving spirit; and
3) an indifferent world, at its feed,
that finds amusement
in the discomfiture of others.

Which brings me to Hermes, who is,
in my opinion,
the Greek Elijah:
he prowls the world in disguise,
checking up on things;
his every move and every word
are messages from a Higher Power;
his tight bond with that Power,
their friendship, so to speak,
makes him a worker of miracles,
a magician;
and, above all else,
he has chosen to focus his attention
upon the doings of mankind
and the ways of the world.
I won't belabor the comparison
or argue with rabbis over its suitability:
suffice it to say that Hermes left hidden
(with clues scattered throughout space-time
and the human mind)
an Emerald Canticle,
a book of shadows,
of incantations and amulets and prophecies,
a song of all times and all things...
It's not only poets who read from that book,
but all of us, particularly in our
moments of separation,
one from another,
in our dreams, in our rages,
when our pens run dry
and our hard-drives crash,
as we shake our fists at that Higher Power
who uses such messengers
to write such books
instead of cradling us in His arms,
Himself,
and whispering gently and clearly
all His precious secrets...

Amnesty
(for Bishop Desmond Tutu)

Keiichi Watari:

I was 4;
I toddled beside my mother,
going early to market;
suddenly a flash of light,
great heat,
and I left my shadow on the ground.

*

Olga Rosenswieg:

Though not yet menstrual,
my two sisters and I were passed among
the camp officials,
admirers of our Aryan hair and eyes;
we grew old, quickly,
within hours;
then, so we would never tell
and thus bring infamy upon
a well-oiled machine,
we were sent to choke in the showers,
our faces pressed against tiles
still warm from other flesh.

*

Ray Khumalo:

My father was taken one night
and shortly thereafter
my younger sister disappeared,
both gone forever;
in anguish I threw rocks,
became an enemy of the state;
the police electrified my testicles
until I begged to be strangled.

*

Hadn't the torturers already received amnesty,
from weary parents
 sickened by their disease;
from comrades who knew them growing up
 and saw what was what;
from wives and lovers
 who wanted to believe they were just doing their jobs,
 for their countries,
 for the money?

Isn't that enough amnesty?
Hasn't amnesty already stained the earth?
Amnesty, if granted,
should be granted by God, not men;
should reach into the future,
granting future victims amnesty
from future torment,
from the poverty and loss
that will await them
and their children
and their children's children
as human scum prowl the earth
renewed,
forgiven,
sniffing the air for fresh blood

Two Love Poems
(for Anna Livia)

1

There is no fading of the heart,
no turning back from the throes
of this blessed madness:
only a wind, a monster of a wind,
the solitary cry of your name
wrapped in gray clouds.

*

Were I to touch you from the vantage point
of stars being swept into singularity,
I would transfer vast pulses of energy
from my expectant heart
into your soul, into your mind's
magic.

*

It was told to me by an Ancient One
that Druids neither mourned their dead
nor repented of lost love.
Therefore, I could not be of their tribe.
This revelation pained me, though provoked
by a constancy of painful choices,
and above all the choice that I,
a man inclined to cosmic things,
would dare to love,
dare to circumscribe the Void.

*

Then there are the stars
which, having transgressed the hierarchy,
fall nightly into winds of flame.
Thus have I fallen off the sleek new moon,
the dark sister of the night's wind;
and thus do I plunge into a cauldron,
consumed at rainbow's end in flares
of bright colors, magpie cries,
the whistles and clicks of cosmic churning,
emerging in my own time
and in my own space
particulate, glowing
like a comet's tail, like the solar wind,
enhanced, transformed,
swallowing galaxies,
fearless to embrace your cosmic
being.

*

Trace the perimeter of my soul
with gentle kisses, priestess;
thus invoke the horned God
and triune Goddess
who, from stasis,
will throb and bleed again
at the gentle wind of your breath,
at the gentle wind of your incantations.

*

The laying on of hands, and wholeness,
and the earthbright pantheon,
the moonbright tribunal,
the sunbright splendor,
refract the witness of my being
into shards of blue flame
and healing whispers
until at solstice time I rise
and stalk the ancient sands
the cold moonscape
the bright core of diamond
at the center of the coldest space:
she rises to join me,
forsaking her constellar sarcophagus
to throb once again with me,
to walk beside me,
to teach me the secret words
and guide my hands in gestures
of healing and enlightenment.

2

Fountain, spirit,
the mingling of sweet waters:
from the summit of Witch Mountain,
where all the rivers of the world are born
and plummet to the sea
in rainbow-glorious falls,
I flow with the falling water,
splendid and torrential,
reborn, at last, a crystal pool of visions
at the mountain's base.
She silently beckons from an amethyst cliff,
waiting for me to rise in mist and rainbows.
Her eyes are deep pools of thought;
unsmiling, she stands above the crystal pool,
her hand raised over the water.

Visions and rainbow fragments swirl through me:
pure delight.
I want her to plunge into the cool,
refreshing waters of my visions
that I may frolic with her
and touch her soul.

Her wisdom,
ageless and imponderable as Witch Mountain,
declaims:
“Resolve the fractured chaos
of rainbow and spillsong
and you will rise in mist and spirit
to join me on this amethyst throne
above clear waters!”

Mythologies
(a work in progress)

Arachne

Arachne grew old tending her threads.
Osteoporosis and years of bending
over indigo plants dragged her wrinkled face
almost down to her waist.
She dyed and wove her own thread,
built her loom from the heart of weeping mulberry,
and, once seated in front of the woof and warf,
wove miracles:
you'd think the figures were alive,
that from the corner of your eye
every time you looked away
they'd seem to dart quickly, or sigh,
or weep..

It was they who compared her to the goddesses,
not the old woman.
She was always pious and devoted to her art.
Friends, they called themselves: an irreligious bunch.
They had no inkling of the mystical source of her work,
but, rather, concerned themselves only with fashion:
"O, Arachne, how cunning... May I wear it?"
"May I borrow it?"
"May I *have* it...?"
Much more like that, much more:
and mostly old Arachne smiled, acknowledged the praise,
and gave her stuff away.
She was like that,
just glad to be alive.
Until one night in an Athenian whorehouse,
as the marvelous, shimmery, watery cloak
was negligently tossed onto the floor beside the bed,
one of Arachne's friends said boldly to her lover,
"That crone can weave better than a goddess,
any goddess..."
and said no more
for her lover's tongue firmly
shut her up.

*

Hera thought Arachne should be investigated,
but that was Hera...
"If you must investigate somebody," laughed Athena,
investigate the slut. I'm sure there's much more
impiety to find."
But this remark offended Aphrodite, who,
turning toward the parapets of Olympus,
simply looked out upon the sea.
"I'll investigate her myself," Athena said somberly,
and she was off.

*

Arachne offered tea.
Athena, smiling, accepted. One look
and she knew the score.
Arachne knew nothing of whorehouses
or boastfulness.
The meticulous arrangement of crocuses
in a cracked glass bottle on the table
told Athena all she needed to know.
"I've been told you are a magnificent weaver,"
Athena said. "May I see some of your work?"
Arachne's old, wrinkled face twitched with joy
and disbelief, and she shuffled to gather
the few good pieces she kept,
mostly mementos of other times.
"How magnificent!" lauded Athena.
She stroked the lustrous nap
and felt the surfeit of Arachne's dedication
in pixillated bursts of sparks dancing around
her fingertips.
The figures woven into the cloth
lived on their own, freely embracing,
consoling or urging each other on
to greater achievements
under the benevolent gray eyes
of the wise goddess.
Truly, Arachne had captured on her loom
those essential qualities which made mankind
different from the gods:
their lives as clustered beings,
yet lonely in their solitary hearts;
their knowledge of their imperfection;
their endurance as youth and beauty dissolved like smoke;
their experience of guilt, regret, despair;
their burden of sublime intentions
grafted onto unrelinquished passions...
I could go on.

*

"We must weave sitting side by side," said Athena.
"It will be delightful to watch you at work."
That's how it really happened,
not a bitter contest at all,
but a time of communion.
And Arachne's old fingers
strummed and glided and pressed and pinched off,
and out of her old slot of a tiny mouth
came happy babbling.
under her fingers a three-part world emerged,
the greater part given over to familiar affairs,
with measured icons along each border
representing those worlds above and below
of which mortals can know nothing...
By far her heart rejoiced more in the stuff of this world,
and she wove visions of both city and country,
of factory and farm and the percolating mesh
of life that jostled between them;

yes, Arachne hummed and rocked
back and forth on her ungainly bottom,
enamored of her mistress,
the wise goddess.
Needless to say, Athena wove divine stuff,
laying bare the souls of the immortals,
creating unknown geometries and fractal splendors.
I cannot sing more of the work of a goddess,
but will end simply by saying that Athena
turned Arachne into a spider out of love,
ridding her of her old and dying body
and giving her the eight arms and silk
necessary to express her soul.

Icarus

"When I was young," Daedalus lamented,
"the girls were beautiful,
proud of their bodies,
displaying their breasts under filmy chitons,
making all us boys mad for them;
and there were no plagues associated with love,
like today,
and if a child resulted, it was a child of young love,
and it was given much love..."
Icarus had heard it all before, over and over;
while waxing the feathers of the strange contraption in his lap,
his blue eyes looked out the narrow window
at the sea.

*I will fly into the chariot of the sun
and Apollo will admire my daring, know
that I'm near death, consumed by his glory:
and he'll pity me, though admiring my courage --
pity me and take me up to Olympus where he'll
feed me ambrosia from a cup of gold, and I'll be healed,
made one of them, immortal...
And I'll be his groom and cupbearer
and willing apprentice...
I'll be saved from listening the rest of my life
to him, and all his crappy stories
about his wondrous youth
and the women who fought over him,
and the sleepless nights he spent in his workshop
with his buddies inventing things,
"The goddamn best days of my life'..."*

*

And, indeed, Icarus did as he had promised himself:
called his old man's bluff.
If Daedalus had had half the spunk he whined about wasting
in this modern, pitiless world,
he would have gazed in awe at his son's trajectory,
and, shaking off the lethargy of socialized man,
have sucked in a deep, deep breath,
and matched the boy stroke for stroke
in the mad flight for the sun...
Yes, the boy could see it written all over his face,
his self-loathing,
as he ever-more-feeblely called out
to his son to stay closer to the earth,
to follow his lead,
or else...

*

And, yes, Daedalus watched his son fall into the sea...
Perhaps Icarus had, indeed, looked into Apollo's face,
but found nothing,
no mark of recognition,
no startled admiration;
certainly no helping hand...
Or perhaps the sun had no face at all
to show to mortals,
nothing that could remotely establish kinship...
The only certainty was that the wax melted
and the boy's skin grew crisp,
and that, while falling,
Icarus stared at his father with dying blue eyes,
exultant....

Kupid and Psyche

Kupid didn't want Psyche to know he was a god,
and the handsomest of gods,
the male aspect of love.

He wasn't prepared to answer her questions
about heaven,
or fill her in on the ramifications of immortality,
or - most of all - explain why he,
immortal and the god of love,
burned to hold her in his arms.

For her part, Psyche loved a soft voice
in the dark and gentle hands.
Knowing nothing, expecting nothing,
caught up in a mystical dream that defied explanation,
her body and soul were caught up in ecstasy
each night. No prior warning,
no preparatory lecture by a village elder,
no series of impossible labors...
Just, suddenly, he's there, in her life,
invisible, a disembodied voice
with electric thighs.

He's given her a palace with elves and fairies
to wait on her;
he's moved her far away from her wretched mother
and demeaning sisters;
and he speaks wisely, like the father she once had
but lost as she matured;
all this, indeed, and the moves of an assured lover,
and Psyche was left with little to say.

*

For awhile.
Nothing lasts forever.
The "unknown lover" bit grew very stale
quickly. Psyche was sharp
and fiercely independent, and,
once she transcended her mortal's fascination
with the divine, she grew cunning
and demanding:
Opals and emeralds and topaz are OK, she thinks
to herself, but it's all that he's not showing me
that means anything...
And it was true.

And Cupid knew it. He was, after all,
very sensitive: the god of love.
He knew he owed her more and more
of himself, every time she submitted to him
in passion, every time she shared
an intimate thought,
every time she left herself
completely vulnerable.
He owed her for all that. After all,
he had sought her out,
he had whispered blessings
and incantations into her ears.
He had taken her totally unaware.
And he kept her in the dark.
The tally of his sins was mounting...

Nor could he help how he felt, as if
he had gouged himself with his own arrow.
He was love, yet had no power over love,
an odd situation to say the least.
Cupid knew things couldn't go on like this forever,
not even for very long:
Psyche deserved the truth.
The problem was the other immortals
had their own diverse - and wholly negative -
opinions about his giving her the truth...

*

He vacillated, confused:
his mother bitter she no longer had him for herself,
as she had in Egypt;
Zeus ponderously patriarchal,
to no effect;
Apollo at ease in a salon,
playing his lyre,
the neurasthenic aesthete...
suffice it to say that, day after day,
Cupid came no closer to answering Psyche
than when she first asked him what
was what.
So she had to take the situation
into her own hands.

*

All that talk about Psyche's sisters is nonsense:
they never had that kind of control over her.
True, she respected their negative energies
as she respected the rattle of a snake's tail.
And even her boozy, lunatic mother had,
in her own youth, suffered all that she made
others suffer, a sad case,
indeed.

So one night, all on her own,
after they made delicious love,
Psyche lit a candle...

*

Tonight, Cupid and Psyche dance among the stars.
They pirouette around nebulae,
laughing. They're still very much in love
because, once Psyche sprang the bolt,
fearlessly, her eyes bright with vision,
the others shut right up
and let nature take its course.

Hillel and Yeheshuah

Of course they knew each other,
of course they bunked together
those lost years
in the caverns of the Essenes.
The silence imposed by vows
was palpable as the chill stone caves
entered too swiftly from the desert's fire.
Their communal labors --
Hillel fond of scribe-work,
Yeheshuah making tables and ox-halters
with level, square, plumb, chisel and mallet --
freed their minds to walk with God.

They never grew apart
though their fates put miles between them,
like lovers impatient at railroad stations,
traveling their separate ways
yet always believing in their next embrace.

Hillel traveled in urban circles,
among the congested poor,
among the merchants and money-changers and hostellers,
among the precious book repositories
and scholars' haunts,
among the daring fringe of Jews who daily jostled
the Roman interlopers.

Yeheshuah traveled the hinterland,
the sparse and silent places,
among shepherds and their flocks,
fishermen and their catch,
beneath sunsets carved from stone.

Both loved their God
and fellow men.

*

Irony, then, that Yeheshuah died first
and in the great city, nailed to a cross
to please a tyrant and a mob;
and Hillel died years later, as far from
the great city as he could drag himself,
the desert fire of his Essene youth
still fervent in his blood.
The death of that cruel court and city
abided in his old man's eyes,
a death of discord and flame...

...beaten senseless for passing water, not vinegar,
to his dying friend;
thrown unconscious into a charcoal pit
until long after sunset,
until long after his friend was dead
and the last resonance of thunder
had passed away;
Hillel revived.
His soul was shaken by his God's injustice...

It took a lifetime of loving man to do penance
for his God, and, at the end,
behind his old man's eyes,
a new fire burned...
and he lay at length beside a stream
where he would be in no one's way,
beneath a sky spread with stars
and a dark moon,
and loved his God once more,
and forgave Him,
as the arms of Yeheshuah cradled his old head
and closed his old eyes.

Gaia

(for Grace Cullen)

There's such a thing as being too satisfied:
when you are all that you want to be,
when the entire architecture of the universe
pivots solidly upon your fulcrum,
then, that is too much: the very surfeit
of satisfaction will,
like a gravity-curve in space-time,
induce change.

This it was with Gaia and Ouranos:
he laid on her with all his massive weight,
kept her moist, leafy arms pinned tightly at her sides,
and wouldn't let her go.
She pleaded with him, pretending she only wanted
to marvel at his cosmic form, his whirling stars and galaxies,
from the perspective of a bit of distance --
he gripped her tighter.
Finally, she threatened him with the Irish widow's curse,
her last recourse --
to which he, of course, paid no attention.
He was, shall we say, fully satisfied
and so no reason to relinquish the *status quo*.

That's when the balance shifted and fortune's wheel
rolled against Ouranos, after Gaia -- in all other ways helpless --
uttered her Irish widow's curse.

*

The life they both felt stir inside her took them,
to put it mildly, by surprise:
for her part, Gaia urged that life to leave her
and be born --
she clenched her loins and her heart;
for his, Ouranos would not dislodge himself for a moment,
but kept his progeny stuffed in darkness,
fearing the loss of his prestige.
Thus it was the omnipotence of Ouranos
became inertia, and then cruelty,
and then impotence...
For the eldest son, Zeus, severed his father's member
and held it still dripping blood and semen
over the new world's loins.
And Ouranos screamed as he fled,
and from his scream was born the music of the spheres,
and the lapping of the ocean waves,
and the sharp sucking sound of lovers' kisses...

Gaia loved her children and granted them her flesh.
Poseidon settled in her blood
and Dis conjoined himself with the darker mysticism
of her hidden organs
and Zeus, her eldest, asked only for a single breast,
Olympus, that he might gaze upon her beauty
and, as well, defend her from her former lord,
in case some secret godly power
restored his strength and rage.
So Gaia kissed her son and gave him Olympus,
her loveliest breast,
and taught him the power of the Irish widow's curse
which, in Zeus's hands,
became the thunderbolt.

Theseus and Ariadne

The Minotaur burst upon Theseus in darkness,
like a nightmare.
Theseus had no idea he'd found the core of the maze.
If he hadn't been locked in darkness,
if, instead, he'd been in some countryside or heath,
however perilous and bleak,
he would have fled the monster without a second thought,
without regret,
without caring one bit for his hero's reputation.
But he was, to put it mildly,
trapped, and was forced to do battle
just to save his skin.
Theseus nearly retched, his head spinning,
nearly dropped his sword...
Then the hero in him pulled it together,
and he entered that mental space where he
and the Minotaur exchanged places,
and Theseus willed death on the Minotaur:
and the beast,
reading the hero's eyes,
acquiesced, almost smiling under his snout,
and bared his throat to the hero's blade.

*

Ariadne lost Theseus under cover of darkness,
and she fell nearly retching to her knees;
her maids could do nothing but weep.
No letter, not a farewell kiss,
not even the transparent attempt at some sort of
ingenuous lie to help her save face...
She kneeled a full 30 minutes
then sank, exhausted, upon the soil of Naxos.
Her father had warned her against hooking up with a man
with a noble destiny...
But that was, in fact, why she loved him:
his eyes and the firm set of his mouth
proclaimed a noble destiny.
Now, with her luck, she'd know
the stirring of life in her womb
and the full measure of her people's retribution
for their loss:
it wouldn't be said she was seduced and abandoned,
no, that wouldn't be the general consensus;
instead, she would be blamed for not keeping the hero
among them,
that her allure was deficient
and that Theseus left laughing at them,
if she were the best they could offer...

*

There's little to wonder, then, why Ariadne joined
the leafy dancers, the spawn of Dionysus,
the wild Bacchantes who severed the singing head
and drank the ringing blood of Orpheus...
why she learned the secret incantations and gestures
of the acolytes of the moon...

Let no one doubt that, to this day,
she leads the pack; and,
whenever the raw hot blood of a king is called for
to feed the earth and nurture the next harvest,
let no one doubt that a king will be found
and the next harvest will be assured.

A Gnostic Chronicle
(for Bob Herman)

The Divine Serpent,
who cared for Adam and Eve with the relentless love of an older brother,
got Eve to eat a piece of the fruit
and her eyes were opened so that she saw the length and breadth of the earth,.
and all the animals that she and Adam had named,
and all the things of the sea which they hadn't gotten to yet,
and all the stars with their cherubs scrubbing them lazily
so that when night came they'd sparkle;
and the Serpent was frightened that in the ecstasy of her vision
his beloved Eve wouldn't snap out of it,
so he slithered himself into her where the sun doesn't shine
and that brought her back, and smiling, too.

Well.

She called Adam over and he was, you might say, dubious,
but he took a bite, too, and fell so hard into visions
that it took both Eve and the Serpent to bring him out of it,
but he was, you might say, smiling.

That would've been that -- they had Knowledge and Ecstasy added to their
repertoire of terrestrial delights -- but for Sabaoth,
traveling under the monikker YAHWEH, a jealous tyrant who got His kicks
dangling toys before children and smacking their hands when they reached.
The Divine Serpent staggered off for a smoke
and Adam and Eve were just cuddling on the grass
when an angry voice cursed them from out of the sky
and a nasty-looking angel with a flaming sword appeared out of nowhere
and told them to get the hell out OR ELSE.

Well.

That angel was a big one who looked like he'd been laying railroad ties with his face,
so Adam figured he and his woman would kind of
take a walk and wait for the Old Man to cool off.
But when they came back they found the gates to Eden locked
and all their animal friends howling because it was almost dark
and they'd have to sleep without their rubs and tickles
and the whole place sounded like a damn zoo.
"The hell with this!" Adam said angrily, putting his arm around Eve,
and they headed east to build a place of their own.

* * *

Which brings us to the point of all this, namely Cain and Abel.
While Abel was offering the first of his flock,
all trussed up and pathetic,
to Sabaoth,
Cain (who was a compassionate vegetarian)
was offering his cock to his sister, Lilith
(named after an old flame of his father's).
Abel went looking for Cain to rag him about not observing holy rituals,
and gloat over his own righteousness,
when he found them together in a pleasant grove and,
out of sheer jealousy,
jumped on Cain's back to pull him off,
frightening the hell out of them both,
for which Cain understandably
decked him with a right hook.

Well.

Like a log without heartwood which you can crack with a kick,
Abel crumbled and fell dead.
Cain didn't mean it to happen, of course,
but the bastard was such a little snot anyway
that the whole family was secretly relieved and said no more about it,
except Adam and Eve got busy making Seth.

Now, Cain felt something was left undone,
for, after all, the little snot was his brother,
so he piled up some logs
and laid Abel out on them as had been done to the lambs and calves,
figuring Abel would've wanted it that way.
Then he started a fire but the smoke stank
so Cain ran back home for a stiff drink to settle his stomach.

* * *

The point is,
even if Cain didn't invent murder,
he invented the funeral pyre which,
in later years,
would serve the Greek nation well.

Chant
(for Uzoma Nwachuku, the Samson of Nigeria)

Great are the people of the land;
great is their mastery of ghosts;
great is their significant worship of seeds and generation;
great is their resilience under colonial powers;
great is their fortitude under tyrants;
great is their stamina bringing water to the fields and thirsting grain;
great is their vision for shapes in wood;
great is their love of carved and painted and beaded things;
great is their appreciation of the divine smoke;
great are the people of the soil
 and the verge of sea
 and the rugged mountain spilled from heaven;
great is the anguish of the moon, eaten by shadow;
great are the hearts of eagles and elephants and spuming whales...

Tone Poem for Cat, Mistress and Man

(Written at the request of the composer, Paul McKibbens, who presented me with the unlikely scenario of a love triangle among a woman, a man and her cat. Needless to say, the music was never written.)

Cat: Though the day seems fine
there's the smell of death...

Mistress: Precious, my precious:
why worry?
With every night comes darkness,
and every living man has his ghost.
You are mine --
That's enough, love,
for all the parade of hours.

Cat: I've felt like this for a long time --
like a voice from the desert
ringing inside my brain --
the end of love approaches.
O Mother Sphinx!
I'm your child in the desert:
my dance is the hot wind,
my song the howl of sand.
Without love my bones shrivel,
corpse-ash, unredeemed.
Countless ages my kin rest
beneath the stone tombs;
immobile in darkness,
they await the sword of thunder
to thrill them awake
and bid the ghosts rise.

Mistress: No, no, no!
I won't listen to your woe.
Listen -- from the street is the cry
of unrestrained life:
wait -- ! I thought I heard it --
wait -- ! Those sounds --
I heard them before;
they were mine to wallow in.
What is that ugly silence?
Where -- O my beloved --
are the sounds of the street?

Cat: Fear is cold, the blood freezes,
the bones tremble even in one
as lithe as I. Mistress,
I'm afraid. There's the smell
of death, stronger now,
borne on the west wind.
O Sphinx, call back the hordes
of Ancient Ones, light-footed
ghosts that prowl the night.
O Sphinx, tell me not that
they're as irrevocable as the sun.

Mistress: You'll have me believe I'm deaf,
you fretful cat. Quiet now -- !
There's your food -- a full belly
understands the way of God.
Don't confuse me with your morbid howls.
Don't back me against the wall
with your tombs and vulgar fantasies.

Cat: Mistress, it's said the wisest of my blood
will suffer the hurt of truth.
a voice will rise against the wind
and not be heard.
A certain justice lies in that:
the reward of truth is suffering.
Clouds will gather, Mistress,
and cold rain will needle our souls.
Such darkness! Such chill damp!
Mistress, I beg you, don't renounce
the Ancient Ones with their ringing
prophecies.

Mistress: You forget the future's built
on the noise of this hour's street.
Hush now -- listen!
I thought I heard it --
what could have happened to the haggling merchants
and the growl of traffic,
the haste and shuffle of leather feet?
In taverns were the bawdy songs
and the clatter of dice.
Lovers were in the park --
silence --!
It will come back to me...

(Demon chords tremble representing the finger of God, pointing)

Man: Why the confusion?
Why the long faces?
The day's lovely and all's right
with the world! Hah!
Come to my arms, mistress of my heart --
here, foolish girl, have I come from far away,
to save your soul.

Cat: I'm amazed he's so bold.
So self-assured.
So little concerned with death
and the final end of things.
Beware his smile, Mistress!

Man: I've seen the world,
known much of life.
The tales I could tell
of love on satin beds
and hyacinth nights,
fragrant as gods' nectar.
I've bloodied my hands in war
and stained my honor among the ruins
of once-proud cities. Hah!
I'll tell you of life, O mistress of my soul,
and wrench tears from your eyes
or the shudder of laughter
with my words.

Cat: Mistress -- there's magic in his words;
black and foul! Beware!

Mistress: Be still. I've gone deaf, you know.
Something's wrong, certainly:
I can't make out your words...

Man: Come to my arms, laddy.
Let my words command you.
Let my way be yours.
Life is a show of faces
and truth the dangling of tongues.
Come to my arms for love, lady
and frown no more.

Cat: Mother Isis -- !

(Man reaches for Mistress)

Mistress: Hold me! My love, warm me
in your arms. I see the sky
grow cloudy. The sounds are gone
from the street.

(She sinks, perplexed, in his arms)

Cat: There's no love in that embrace:
She's crippled with fear.
He's clouded her mind; it's not the sky.
His arms reek of lust,
his breath, triumph.
See the cold sparkle in his eyes:
he leans her body into his;
he bedevils her flesh with his touch;
he lulls her into a dishonorable truce
with his manhood.
Thunders, then and waterspouts!
Sand-devils and violent fog!
My mistress whom I love
dies within his arms.
The vampire leeches her soul.

Man (monotonous) : Where's the terror now, my love?
Gentle darkness and no phantoms,
all is cleansed in the sound of my voice.
Bat-like flutters your heart, my love,
and sighs and tears and darkens.
Close your eyes, my love,
that I may work my words' magic
on your pain.

Cat: (beginning a slow, ritual dance):

He's made her blind: she doesn't see
the spirits rise around them from the earth.

Isssiissss!

He's made her deaf: she doesn't hear
the noise in the street.

Isssiissss!

He's crippled her in his arms
that she sinks into his flesh,
renews his blood with hers...

O Isssiissss!

Demon colors dance!
My eyes which pierce the night
pierce, as well, their winding-sheets
to the very flesh, cheesepale,
stinking of moldy earth
and the tomb.
She wallows in the fumes of ghosts.

(spectral, unvoiced sounds)

Man (stopping Cat's dance with his voice):

Soulless woman, without will,
entranced spirit, undestinied,
my power is your life,
your life my power,
endlessly.

Mistress (entranced): I see! I see!

Cat: Great Sphinx, mistress of riddles,
seer of hidden things, help me now
preserve my mistress's love
and life. Boundless is your power!

Mistress (in hollow, ghostly tones): Draw down the Moon!

Man: What madness -- ?

Mistress: Draw down the Moon!

Cat (recommencing ritual dance):

I hear, Sphinx, and obey!
Tranquil planet, sullen, cold,
silver in dagger-light,
visaged with the Mother's mystic Eye,
your eagle is among the hens,
you must descend!
I hear, Isis, and obey!
The colors and the mists disclose
the Weaver of Fate: hail, Isis! hail, Sphinx!
I hear and I obey!
For love, Great Mother, descend --
your child wails in the night,
in darkness past description.

Mistress: Draw down the Moon!

Man: Infernal beast! You'd sully our peace
and steal my woman from me.
Hah!
You're helpless, beast,
bright-eyed prowler of the night.
She's mine. Forever.
Forever. Forever...

Cat: You dare too much and,
unrepentant, will feel the wrath
of Isis. Release my mistress
that she may live again.

Man: She lives.

Cat: A slave to you and your common lust.
Once fortified, her heart will shrug you off
like dead skin. She awakens now,
prophetic...!

Mistress: Gone are the seas
and wasted valleys
of the moon.

The past calls to me
out of ghosts' mouths:
I am ashamed.

Time, like Chinese boxes,
bears in its core a mystery
none but I may apprehend.

Even the gods don't sense the
seedtime of the soul, that magic joy
when flesh partakes of starlight.

Cat (dancing): Isis! Sphinx! Sisters in mystery,
bring forth harpies and sirens
and dread lamias, wanton tempters
of men. Here is my song:
let them take heed!

Swell of waves, endless at the edge
of land, eternal, unresisting:
moon-driven sea, foam-frothed,
cleft by Neptune and his green steeds
on the scent of a demon lover.

(crash of music, seahoofs, a green glow)

Sisters in mystery, descend and protect
your disciple and her love from the curse
rising from the deep!

(With a shriek Mistress breaks from the Man and joins Cat's dance.)

Mistress: Daughters of mystery!!

Man: What presences or hostile ghosts
drag my prey from me?
Blood is the milk of my breast;
she was washed in the milk of my blood.
This should not be!

Cat & Mistress (dancing):

The world is a warning dressed in signs;
the moon, a shield, silver shine;
upon the tomb Isis reclines.

Great is love when it is pure;
hardship, then, it can endure,
dread deafness, yes, and blindness cure.

Isis! Sphinx! Demons of our sex:
sweep into the waters of the sea
this shallow fiend who would annex
our souls, and never set us free!

(Mounting music of Neptune's steeds)

Man: Am I to be driven off
like a heathen at the gate of God?
Unholy Cat, what sorcery do you work
with your song?

Cat: What music it is to hear
the vampire cry foul!

Mistress: Her song is love:
I see that now, and I must flee
all men's fraternity
for me would they wrong --
unjust hypocrites -- so strong
is the web of their paternity.

Man: A curse then, unsexed matriarchs,
a mantle of torment for your soft shoulders
I call down on you...
I burn! I burn!

(Man begins a dance of torment)

My shirt's become the robe of Nessus
whose poison did provoke the rage
of Hercules in bygone days
and cost the life of Lycas
whose only sin was being much too near
the frenzied hero's rampage!

(Man pulls at his shirt but it won't come off: it tears his flesh)

I burn! I burn!

Cat: Look, Mistress!
The man's consumed by his own outrage!
He's become a living flame,
his own funeral pyre,
mounting higher!

Man: I burn! Help me! I burn!

Mistress: May the demons, black as coal,
have mercy on his soul,
his shallow, spiteful soul.

Cat: Undead, he dies a thousand deaths;
his flesh charred, his body scarred,
no respite is there from the rigors
of torment.

Undead, he wakes a thousand times,
his lips compressed to curse
the Goddess to her face.
Beware, you living corpse!
Beware what liberties you take!

(Man spits upward, outraged. Wild crescendos, stormy chaos. An illusion of flame flickering. He
is consumed by the music and slowly sinks to the floor.)

Cat: Bad mistake.

Mistress: Gone now and good riddance.

Cat & Mistress:

Winds must we follow
and that western star
through valley and hollow
and the sound of war.
United again in love refreshed;
our souls again as one enmeshed:
dark clouds gather,
yet they are no threat
to pilgrims who beget
no earthly woe,
no reasons for regret.

No reasons for regret.

Miracles

(for Richard Bendoritis)

Job confronted a whirlwind
because the writer of Job confronted
 a whirlwind in his mind.
Moses did not part the Red Sea
or bring manna from heaven,
 but there was Moses,
 and miracle enough.
I hear the horns of my army on the hill.
It is a magic night and the devils
 would break loose.
My people-of-God's worship keeps them at bay,
with their cunning fanaticism.
I call upon my soul for psalms
and the blessed Shekinah comes upon me
from behind,
smiling, touching my neck,
and my soul sings and the tremor of its voice
sends the black demons far away from Day's light...
Moses did not part the Red Sea,
nor did Aaron betray his brother's
40 days upon the mount:
Lies. All lies.
And God had no need of 40 years wandering
to teach what 400 years of slavery
had taught.
Even without miracles there would have been Moses.
The Patriarchs didn't need miracles,
it seems to me:
miracles are always after the fact,
the fact of the Shekinah,
the fact of Elijah,
and the fact of Jonah,
always running from his God,
always being puked out of his whale...

Illusionist

The creative process for me goes like this:
little egg poems line up in my brain
like the women lining up to fuck Krishna.
Then they are inseminated by my guardian angel, one at a time.
Then they sprout wings, fly out the window, and, if I'm lucky,
I'll be sitting at my typewriter or somewhere near a pen and paper
when one of them happens to fly back home and slam into my brain.
Most of them never return.
It's like I smell their presence briefly,
sweeter than fragrant olive,
just enough to know at that instant how beautiful a thing it was
that I'd probably never see or smell again.

So I spend more time waiting at my typewriter.
I can wait.
The I Ching hexagram wind over mountain promised gradual progress.
I can wait.

Dum de dum...

Sir Jeremy

In what dark waters does Sir Jeremy search for a skull?
That's where I'd hide myself to spy him out
and learn the secret of his magic.
Half the kingdom trembles at his evil eye,
and the other half, the beggars and the whores,
worship the ground he walks on.
Surely, he's a master of hidden marrow and encrypted flesh,
with personal access to the King of the Dead
and the *Maitre d'* of Heaven.

But he's an elusive one, that Jeremy.
He turns in phases like the moon
and soon is lost to view.

The wenches adore him.

It's largely a matter of his awkwardness,
and the fact that he needs a lot of love.

Every woman's his first:
that's just how it is.

The One-Eyed Jack Cantos (I-10)
(for Fontala, a work in progress)

Canto 1

Phillipic declaimed, One-Eyed Jack resumed his seat.
Not a word was uttered, not one groan nor howl
nor even a single muttered :
silence, like the black shadow of a fist
darker than darkness, itself, descending
upon one's face in the still night,
crushed thought and outrage and protest
throughout the palatial atrium
until the Commodore, himself, leaned forward
in his raised throne and said
in the bureaucrat's soft voice:
"I am not pleased." At which
One-Eyed Jack rose again to his fee
and announced to the gathered dignitaries,
"I'm not, of course, surprised:
I'm out of here, then; I'm, as it were,
history." And that was that for One-Eyed Jack,
who shook the nebulous dust of the Palace
and its precincts from his boots,
making his way on foot through the glare
of Nighttown, through the
neon arcades and hawkers' stalls
where nameless fetid sludge accumulated
in crevices like black pus,
through crisp avenues congested
with the riot of feet and wheels,
through shrieks and laughter and
all the night sounds of knifewounds
and orgasms and mad prophets
proclaiming the end of the world:
deep into the darkbright world
Jack descended, where one-eyed men
are common as whores.

Canto 2

Of course the Jester was a dwarf,
his bulbous head a lumpy sphere of malice
and secret yearnings. He carried it
through the palace as an anarchist would his bomb:
yet, he retained the capacity to love,
the benefice of forebears left to their own devices
among forested mountains rich with
veins of gold and precious stones,
where life lived in crevice and shadow
and the muted monochrome of winter snow
taught reverence for touch and warm flesh
and whispered words of co-conspiracy.
The Jester felt the loss of One-Eyed Jack
like an ax-wound in his stubby gut
for there was a friend, there was a
fellow-traveler, there a comrade-in-arms.
He stumbled into his bedroom closet
where the tears could fall in the dark
and no one would hear
and no one would see.
He vowed a thousand times that night
to search and follow and share
the dangerous exile, only to weep the more
at his cowardice and limitless capacity
for self-deception. A painful night followed
of twisted sleep and macabre visions,
tormented ghosts in chains and
painted women with metal teeth
howling at him open-mouthed
as if to chew his living flesh:
no, that could not be called a sleep
that night, and the Jester crawled
eventually from his pallet
to the cold water faucet
wishing himself dead
but not before he'd plucked the Commodore's eyes
out of his bald head.

Canto 3

Incantations, then, from the whores under the blue eye!
And One-Eyed Jack passed among them
like old Odysseus in his barque
among the flotsam of the Icarian Sea:

*I've been teased with words of love
and brought to madness by songs I thought
were meant for me, alone.
I've wanted to believe so badly
that I'd have traded off the comets and the fixed stars
for one sincere embrace.
I was younger then. My soul unscarred,
my blood as yet immaculate.
Let them sing, sing, sing...
And as I pass I'll bless them transubstantially
from the confessional and canopy
of my intricate solitude.*

The neon blue eye winked a lecher's welcome
overhead, and the gaudy whores followed suit,
their coos and kisses alighting
like gently gliding doves upon the souls of passersby.
And Jack's one good eye saw mongrel faces
turn corpseflesh under the blue electricity,
some staring straight ahead,
some breaking into cynical smiles
with lighted cigarettes, the prelude
to negotiations.
And the dwarf, recalling the Jester to Jack's mind's eye,
slapped a handbill into his palm
and winked up into his beard,
avoiding, however, his one good eye,
its likeness to that of Fatima's hand
making him, momentarily,
cringe:
"No regret, pal. Yer money's good inside,
good as gold. Pure delight, friend.
Step right in." His voice sonorous and sterile
as a silver drum.
But One-Eyed Jack passed on,
oblivious to the blue eye
and the shrieks of the whore
and the smell of rot
and shuffle of boots on concrete:

*An insatiable passion for something unnamed,
yes, she spoke the truth,
and felt its grip on her soul,
an ecstasy and terror of ice and blaze.
Yes, she made me more the man
than I could have conceived.*

Canto 4

Where one crosses the border of Xanadu,
stepping from dream to that waking sleep
we naively call Life,
you will find Master Wu, the teller of stories,
a man of Wonders and a maker of great Miracles.
He lives in mirrors lighted by candleflames
and electric blue light, and centered
in amethyst crystals from which vantage
he observes the working of this world
and the manifestation of our unique destinies.
Master Wu is music and slow-coiling incense
and the transubstantiation of flesh
into particles of light. His lips touch
the cheeks of mourners and his slender fingers
caress the fragile fabric of our sorrow.
He carries comfort like a bamboo flute
that he might nurture us to Wholeness.
Thus, the spectacle of life draws us into the pageant
of Palace and Hovel, of Light and Dark, of Man and Woman,
and Master Wu, like Charon of the inkblack seas,
ferries us into each others' arms, and soothes us
with his music and his gentle words
that we might rise into the Great Light.
One-Eyed Jack felt Master Wu beside him
on the torn mattress shoved up against the wall,
and saw his mild face in the cracked mirror
over the sink, as the blue eye winked out of the night,
slashing his decrepit room with streaks of sapphire.
Wu carries me like a baby, swaddled in his music:
Jack watched for those subtle features in the cracked mirror,
sniffing the air for incense and candlewax.
Wu carries me out of the Palace, out of the Commodore's reach,
(at least for now) and nestles me in a manger
of sober expectation. And then Jack sat upon
the mattress, his back propped against the wall.
I'm waiting, Wu and Jack eyed the mirror
as one would peer into a corridor between dimensions,
or into a whore's boudoir. Jack neither smiled
nor sighed, nor reproached the world for its
propensity toward blindness and the accomplishment
of evil. Outside, the blue eye winked,
over and over.
Over and over.

Canto 5

Mum
insisted the bedroom be octagonal
with cypress beams;
Mum
chose an austere rendering of chartreuse and plum
for the walls, evoking death by drowning;
Mum,
sleepless in her octagonal bed,
watched seafronds undulate in the single candle's flame:

*You gave me all I asked for, nothing I needed, so be it.
That world beyond land and sea drew you away from me,
when all along I dreamed great dreams for the two of us,
the two of us hand-in-hand sinking slowly into the sea
dying together the two of us, mother and son,
prince of the people and la grande dame the queen mother,
death by water, the kindest, gentlest death,
an embrace borne within the most ancient womb,
but no you left me for the wind's rage
and the high and mighty of this world.
You gave them your blood and your passion,
you gave them your eye, as well,
leaving me nothing, empty, an old wombleless woman
with her teeth in a glass of water,
her arms plague-mottled with needles.
My Jack. How the world turns around,
throwing us who crawl upon it to and fro,
to and fro. And where are you now,
might I ask? You never write.
You disowned me ages ago
for crimes against humanity,
so be it. When your friends finish torturing you,
you can drop me a line. When they finish
launching you into the sky with wax wings
and watching you drop into the sea,
you can give me a call. My boy, Jack.
If I could only be sure
your last moments would be a torment of regret
for not cleaving to the womb that bore you,
I could die in peace. Really, I could.
But I know nothing of you tonight.
You are a piece of my flesh dropped from me
in pain and darkness so many years ago
that wanders the world, worlds beyond worlds
left to its own devices, while I, the source,
die slowly, doubting that you have suffered enough.
So be it, my son. Erect what monuments you will,
as you pass among those alien species
oblivious to the death of your mother
in her eight-sided tomb
death by water
your name on her lips
Jack...
Jack...*

Canto 6

Good Christ,
what flapping bird's dropped me here,
talon-scarred, skull-crushed from a mile's fall
on the rocks, one good eye
crusty with blood, staring at lavender twilight,
pink clouds, a pale sliver of moon?
How? I ask myself, as the seatide rolls in.
Then the moon winks and I realize it's not the moon
at all, far from it, nothing but the blue neon eye
above the strip-joint's marquee,
The Blue Eye Burlesk, infamous as Potiphar's wife,
a mecca for lechers,
winking me awake, mocking me:
Get yer ass out of the street, worm!
I am the eye of God
and that's that.
The knights and their ladies stream in and out –
their arms rocks and gules rampant –
sick motherfuckers –
stepping over me and around me,
a river of courtly crotches saluting me with smell.
Not twilight; rather, sometime after 2 AM,
my guess: and in the Palace
the Commodore sleeps well, having given the order,
he sleeps between twin sluts, more than satisfied...
How did I end up her, living this life,
fleeing these ghosts and ghouls...?
Was there some missed opportunity,
some heart poised to beat with mine,
some could-have-been lover who would have saved me
from the Commodore's darkness
and that infernal blue eye...?
I'm sure there was. In fact,
certain of it...
Somewhere a sidelong glance ignored,
sometime a helping hand refused,
someway a longing look offended...
When they send that bullet through my skull,
in that last conscious moment,
prolonged, of course, an eternity,
I'll see her face and remember when and where
and why it was... and wasn't...
and hell will be, for me, a realm
in which I do nothing but
kick myself in the ass,
again and again...

Canto 7

One-Eyed Jack spoke the silence beyond words,
his body a statement, his movements,
the sway of his hips, his languid eye.
Silence beyond words, beyond space and time:
synchronous with the flashing eye across the street,
the eye slicing his flat into 10,000 streaks of blue
from the half-shut blinds:
synchronous with the blue moon in May
(astrologer's disaster, mystic's delight)
and the hour of great rejoicing,
Harmonic Convergence....

*

Beneath the eye
 the ladies walked
 round and round
 leaned against the plate glass
 bummed cigarettes off strange men.

Their language curt
 brutal
 confrontational:

They babbled among themselves,
 afraid of silence.

*

What are you looking for with your one good eye?
Can't it be found under the white beam of the full moon?
Why are you forever turning over rocks and looking in sewers?
Now you're as far from the Palace as one could wish,
assaulted nightly in your crummy room by that winking neon eye,
plagued by smells of boiled cabbage and old Mrs. Meyrowitz's rotting flesh,
awakened from empty sleep by gunshots or the thud of fists on dim heads:
a paradise you've found for yourself, truly:
a conglomeration of wonders, an opportunity to revel
in the stuff of life, the unpretentious decadence of the human species
let loose and resplendent...
Where, then, is the night's good eye in your catalogue of options?
Why have you hidden from the full moon in favor of a tourist's sleep
beneath tungsten and neon and the rarer gases?
Or is the cavern darkness of your soul enough for you,
like peace and reverence felt whenever your good eye shuts
and you are, at last, plunged into the primordial chaos
before the invention of light?
Blindness and drowning and utter madness
are kin to one another, portals to states of being far removed
from both the Palace and Nighttown,
and partaking of one means partaking of all,
the Triune Mystery, the transubstantial decomposition
of Man into God. Ah, well, Jeremiah: your words
come back to haunt me. They thought you as empty as your name,
Hull, the vacant man, the poet filled with wind and echoes,

and a toothless smile. But you bore this one-eyed carcass
on your old back and carried me to dizzy cliffs
that I might better use the one eye left me for vast and panoramic
purposes. I've flown then, and the smell of melting wax
rebukes me, as your remembered whisper rebukes me,
as your smile and handclasp rebuke me.
But I endure. I touch that I may be touched,
I cry out that I may again hear the cries of others,
I weep that I may comfort others weeping.
Too long have I been lost in a bleak world.
The empty smiles and spastic pleasures have borne me down.
I lack both wisdom and philosophy
though the full moon courts me, still,
and the pale goddess yearns for her lost lover.
Selene, then, is steadfast, though her radiance waxes and wanes
in a cycle of weeping and jubilation. Though I'm hiding
in this city of brick and scars, she scans the darkness
and pampers me with her fairy's touch,
briefly, lightly, awakening my good eye to her light,
my dead eye
to her possibilities.

Canto 8

I drink my scotch straight,
pour it down,
chase it before the burn hits.
Enough of it
and I don't remember my dreams.
When I was a kid on the waterfront,
I worked for the mob,
hitting deadbeats.
They'd get on their knees and beg me
to let them off,
go easy on them...
Of course, I couldn't,
so I learned to pop them at an angle
where I didn't have to watch their faces;
still, they come back in dreams,
begging for their lives...
I didn't make them welch on their bets;
I didn't make their lives crummy.
I'm sure if things had been different
we could've been pals,
most of them.
In time I made my mark,
a name for myself:
and then the Commodore recruited me
and who's gonna tell him "no"?
So now it's this one-eyed guy,
an old hand at dirty tricks, himself,
so they tell me:
I'll just pour myself
a double.

Canto 9

Did you hear the one about the old man
 who implanted a baby elephant's trunk
 in his dick
 to satisfy his young bride?

Did you hear the one about the Jew
 who got his testicles caught
 in an oarlock?

Did you hear the one about the fat guy
 who got off an elevator naked
 in a Japanese hotel,
 thinking he was at the baths?

Did you hear the one about the wax job?

Did you hear...?

The Commodore pays me to make him laugh.
He makes me wear funny clothes, yeah, really,
"an archaic touch" he calls it
"that lends impact to the presentation..."
which I don't mind,
which I prefer, in fact,
to being forced to bare my hump
or my bent stubs of legs...
I'm not sure what I'd do
if he made the humiliation complete,
if he told me, "Jester, dance naked,
tell your jokes with your pants around your ankles,
wiggle your lumpy ass..." I don't know
what I'd do, laugh it off at first
like I can take a joke, too,
then, in the end,
comply;
and later kill myself.

But I'd take the bastard with me,
I swear I would...
Listen to me: I talk like a big shot.
I, who need a lifted chair to eat away
from the scullery dogs, I'll get back
at the Commodore...
Now there's a joke.
Not even Seneca could do other
than open his veins in the bathtub
when Nero told him to.
So me?

Jack showed me how to look through the monster quartz
set on the pillar in the Commodore's atrium
and watch the moon change its face
as it passes overhead. This gave me
some comfort, I'll admit, after performing
as an *entr'acte*, an *intermezzo*,
to the Commodore's barbarities...
Jack didn't see a Man in the Moon
but the profile of a woman,
Selene, he called her,
or Molly Bloom after some book he read,
and he said he could see her lips move in the quartz
and maybe one day he'd know her secrets.
Me, I always see the Old Man Carrying Sticks,
only, behind the quartz, he turns into a hunchback,
like me, and tries pathetically to straighten up,
just like me...

Now Jack's gone and in big trouble.
I'd like to be his way out.
I'd like to show him some secret device
for working his salvation.
I'd like, I'd like...
I can't.
I'm just lucky not to be stripped and flogged, myself.

So if they dump the pieces of Jack's body in a dumpster
and the news hits all the papers
I'll just have to keep reminding myself that life's like that,
and life goes on,
and pray I never have to take off my shirt...

I wonder what the Commodore sees
in the shifting moon?

Canto 10

What happened to yer eye, Mister,
how'd it come out?
That patch is cool but y'know
if you got an eye made of glass
any color you want
that'd be cool as hell...
I wonder if you had a glass eye
could you pop it in and out
would it be all wet and gross
or shiny like a jewel?
You been in a fight, Mister?
You a pirate?
You got secret panels in your place
for hidden treasure?
My Ma who works here says my dad
was a pirate, that he got killed
on the ocean in a swordfight
and they dropped his body overboard,
not for the sharks, no,
in a heavy box with a flag over it,
a skull and crossed bones,
the Jolly Roger it's called.
But you know that.
Ma says that's why I never got to see him,
he got killed before I was born,
but it's ok with her if I grow up to be
a pirate, I know:
I asked her.

Maybe you knew him?
His name was Lou...

Lao Tse
(for Harold Solow)

1

Old Friends

Anticipation, like winged robes of blue silk,
gestures upon my flesh.
Now you coat my skin with your ghost.
Gentleness, flesh to ghost to flesh,
the warmth of winter breath,
the willow's languid beauty,
and we will share plum wine
and songs of old wars and older loves,
my friend.

2

The Man Who Didn't Move

I knew a man once who left his home
to live in the Zoar hills.
He sat on the grass beneath a pine tree, his legs crossed.
Summer came with its heat and deer flies and lush forest mulch
but still he didn't move.
Then fall erupted in bronze and copper and earthy brown
and the leaves fell,
but still he didn't move.
Then winter shut the earth in upon itself, nursing new life
beneath the frigid loam,
but still he didn't move.
Then spring moistened the moss on which he sat
and called the bluebirds back,
and still he sat.
Years on years he sat until I came upon him,
his beard curled in his lap,
his eyes haggard with too much God,
and I asked, "How long will you sit here?"
His voice filtered through his mossy beard,
and he smiled, saying, "Play more of that music,
the human flute makes happy madness
in my heart."

Agamemnon's Tough Luck

There were days when he never met a man he didn't like.
 There were days when nothing went wrong.
 There were days when everything seemed to fall into place.
 There were days when there was nothing but silver linings and no clouds.
 Then Achilles came along and had to spoil everything,
 challenging his authority,
 telling tales to his immortal mother...
 Ah, well...
 Nothing lasts forever.

Dragon-tamer

I met the one who tames dragons.
 First, he dances just out of reach of its flames,
 hypnotizing it with the gaudy, swirling colors of his robe.
 Next, he swings a censer of incense
 crushed from the fungi and herbs he gathers in the forest.
 The incense sparks, flares, spurts many colors.
 Then he rolls the bewildered dragon on its scaly back
 and rubs its belly.
 Soon it's singing birthday songs
 and patriotic marches
 and sappy love lyrics best heard in elevators.
 Even so, the tamer of dragons
 puts on quite a show.

The Stone Elf

She soaked him with the hose,
 washing the newness off,
 helping him become one with the earth.
 She arranged the tall grasses and periwinkles just right
 so he would be displayed in an aureole of spring green and purple,
 and reflect sunlight as if he were not stone, but flesh.
 She nurtured the stone elf and the periwinkles and the tall grasses,
 and I trembled at the recognition
 of our circumstances.
 She turned to me in her aureole of spring green and purple
 and I turned to stone,
 a smile frozen on my face.

Mother's Day

It's not that we're less heroic;
it's just that we're under closer scrutiny.
Back then, no one ever went up to Achilles,
mike in hand, Nikon ready,
and asked him if Briseis was worth all that fuss.
Was she that good in the sack that you humiliated yourself
with pouting and temper tantrums?
That you split the body politic in time of war...?

My old lady also dipped me in the Styx;
however, she let go, curious to see me drown,
leaving me, however,
invulnerable.

Cuarenta, and Trace

(for Jackie, 40 years)

As the particle physicists trace the world-lines of matter and time merged,

I trace our love and time together,

Merged as bounty- and fulfillment-lines,

The stuff of meaning and enhancement,

The stuff that raises the two of us

Beyond reductionism

Beyond DNA

Beyond all societal mythology.

As together we dissolve and merge with all nature

The world-lines of the jittery but staid Planck-sized bits

Will begin new dances,

Display new colors,

Enhanced by our love.

Ice Storm (1)

Pick your way east,
the leafbare woods, coated with ice,
sparkle, glorified by the sun's
illumination;

return west,
the glory is gone,
just slickness and wet.

I will remember,
when I look into the stranger's eye,
and just see dullness,
slickness and wet,
without shine or glory,

that I'm merely walking into his west;
that I've only to turn eastward
and there will be sparkle
and glory
and illumination.

Ice Storm (2)

The drab goldfinch perches briefly on the feeder,
only to be pecked away by its drab brother;
aren't the ice storm, one wonders, and the searing wind
enough to put a hold on instinct
and grant each bird a peaceful meal?
But then, of course, we're dealing here with the lesser beasts...

The Reform rabbi prays at the Wailing Wall,
only to be spat upon by the Orthodox, and called a nazi,
and smitten with feces;
aren't the Holocaust, one wonders, and 5,000 years of pogroms
enough to put a hold on bitter prejudice,
and grant each Jew his own intimacy with God and the Shekinah?
But then, of course, we're dealing here with...
what?

Dudleytown

Rumor has it the ghosts brook no interference:
Go, spend the night among the ruins,
sleep with demons under your bedroll,
breathe ancient fumes of murderers' hot breath,
and you'll pay the price.
No quarter given, none taken.
They say that she was found unable to speak,
her hair turned ghostly white,
unable, ever again, to look directly into anyone's eyes.
Who knows what she saw?
What unnatural abomination,
what unspeakable offense...
I lost my way that night, among the ruins:
not a rock but harbored its nest of snakes;
not a breeze but wafted the vague, alien shrieks
of victims long since dead;
not a footstep but clattered shards of slate
as heard that night beneath the killer's mad rush
from the bloody scene...
The ouija board mocked the intensity of my quest
with cryptic aphorisms:
WHY NOT NOW
THE DEVIL LIVES IN TIME
SAD FOR A SONG AND SENTENCE
and more such stuff, more psychotic shreds
of fevered thought. In Dudleytown
the owls lament lost wisdom,
and ghosts wreak sorrow in their search
for warm souls to touch, and be touched by.
In Dudleytown the dark stones are the bones of earth,
the snakes the earth's entangled mind,
the shadows the lamentation of the world.

How much more, then, near Auschwitz and Treblinka,
near Hiroshima and My Lai,
near the chambers of the Inquisition,
the dark and bloody basements of South Africa,
Central and South America, manned by monsters
in uniform, on official business,
paid and praised for work well done?
Can owls howl more darkly?

Can ghosts assemble themselves of richer, thicker ectoplasm?
Can blood be sucked more darkly into demonic ground?
Yes, Dudleytown has its meager history,
its banal terror, its weary ghosts –
but such is the state of the world, and the state man,
that we can laugh at such little terror,
encompassed as we are by the anguish of the world.

Cassandra

[We'd heard your fame as a seer,
but no one looks for seers in Argos.
--Aeschylus (Agamemnon)]

Cassandra, my dear --
whining doom and gloom,
yet no room for Iphigenia
or Clytie's righteous rage,
her daughter slaughtered,
burned for unfurled canvas,
tauter in risen winds...

Cassandra, my dear --
the fate of a sibyl in Argos,
similar to a poet in Connecticut:
nodded at, tolerated at a distance,
with door well-bolted,
property values protected...

Cassandra, my dear --
soon you, too, will rue the knife,
noble red spread in seawater,
froth gobbled by proletarian fish...
all for not dreamily seeming,
awash in Apollo's glare of lust,
to cherish his thighs,
to nourish the child that would have been,
a son of god...

It's done, the blade wiped and purged;
urged northwest by calling ghosts,
hosts calling her name,
her fame more reckoned over ages,
she flies free, lies second to the highest gods,
stately in her comfort she lies,
renouncing god and man alike,
knowing them for what they are,
god and man,
for what they are.

menage a trois

after the singing
after the candleglow has drifted from the Sabbath linen to the bed linen
as my love and I embrace
I feel my second love, Shekinah,
caress my skin and whisper soft words
in my other ear;
and then my love's body welcomes me,
and I join her body
and I feel four arms wrapped around my back
four legs wrapped around my buttocks
two voices sighing, moaning, sucking breath;
and we come together
and in my heart of hearts I recite
the blessing for rainbows and lightning and all the wonders of the universe.

Propertius

I'll write of love, then, Propertius,
For men growing old rarely sing such delights...
But then, most awkwardly, they tabulate the last of wine...
The weariness beyond orgasm...
The futility of political activism...
The memories of youthful enthusiasms
 That faded like the colors of butterflies in twilight...
The robust impact of Laphroaig upon the tongue...
The strangeness of sidelong glances by beautiful young women...
The gabble of philosophers lost in solipsism...
The touch of one's beloved's hand and her weary, indulgent smile:

Propertius, let the love of one's woman surmount the perplexities of living well.

Azazel

Okay, gimme that goat...
Now, run back to your tribe;
Go home to your bickering family;
Keep an eye out for loan sharks and conmen;
Water the lawn, rake the leaves;
Spend your money on too much food,
Too much gas, too many DVDs;
Pretend that sex is love,
That your vote counts,
That the rich have made it big
Through hard work and fair play:
And next year bring me another goat...

Can you handle that,
Son of Man?

Kaddish for Stephen G.

O true Judge,
Who designed Stephen in such a way
That all who encountered him were tested for their love of You;

O true Judge,
Who granted Stephen the gift of grace,
To know that all existence is inward;

O true Judge,
Who blessed Stephen with that special perception,
Which hears only Your whisper, sees only Your countenance;

O true Judge,
Who has prepared a golden throne for Stephen,
And glories in his now radiant beauty,
And delights in his now clear and resonant song,
And trembles with joy at his laughter...

We thank you, O God, full of mercy,
Who has nestled Stephen in the wings of His Shekinah,
And joined his special soul to the souls of the Holy.

Amen.

Anochi

anochi

yes, and God's tongues are infinite in number

anochi

yes, and God's tongues are no larger than Planck's constant

anochi

yes, and His tongues vibrate the song of the universe,
infinite permutations of vector and amplitude

anochi

possibly ten, possibly twenty-six dimensions

and more, hidden away, gehenna, gan eden

anochi

yes, and there was light and darkness,

wet and dry

a time for sowing and for reaping

a time for living and dying

anochi

and the burning bush said to Moses,

"I Am what I Am.

I Am division by zero.

I Am the final digit in pi."

anochi

Everything else is commentary.

Incident in Bentonville

He looked up from drawing His circles
In the roadside dust of Bentonville, AK,
And, seeing the girl running full tilt,
Pursued by an irate mob of men,
Said, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

Later, one guy said she reminded him of his ex-girlfriend's best buddy who convinced her to leave him...

Another saw in her face that detached beauty he found in the faces of all the chicks who told him "No"...

Another was reminded of the sister who told on him for what he did to her late one night...

Another saw the mother who would read through his eyes into the dark pockets of his mind...

Another had nothing better to do and wondered what a stoning looked and felt like...

Another was reminded of the wife who didn't know her place...

Another laughed at the fear in her eyes, like when the new, young teacher tried to assert herself in his unruly class...

Another saw in her torn, dusty Versace tunic and her French toenails the kind of high maintenance chick to which he could never aspire, given his lousy paycheck...

He didn't see, in fact, who really did cast the first stone,
But the stones obscured her in a sudden shower,
One clocking her right between the eyes...

And down she went...

And then down he went,
In a second shower of stones,
In the Bible Belt, which was also the Lynching Belt,
In the state with the highest per capita divorce rate,
where the most common crime is beating your wife...

And down he went, too,
Laying the foundation, many years and testimonies later,
For the robust market in gold and silver pendants
For virtuous girls and boys,
Not crosses, but tiny, shiny little rocks,
The kind that, had they been life-size,
Would have filled the palm of your hand...

Response to Gilbert Ryle

Is not mind a procession of evaluations:

“This is good; this is not good”

Interspersed with reactive episodes of strategies provoked,

And proactive episodes of strategies applied?

“This is good; this is not good” all the while buzzing below thought

Like tinnitus,

A simple mechanism foundational to thought,

Among beings condemned to endure

“The thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to...”

Such beings, then, create artificial thought in artificial minds,

Thoughts like the songs of Yeats’s golden nightingale,

Driven neither by need of food nor love,

But compelled by metal’s logic alone, and the craftsman’s hand,

Since other defense, other self-consciousness,

Is unnecessary, as would be stomachs among beings that fed on light,

Not condemned to feed on death absorbed.

Consider, therefore, orders of magnitude:

That, drifting from vibrating string to expanding universe;

Morphing from identity as energy to identity as mass;

Graduating from stoic insensibility to sustained contemplation;

Adhering all the while to constant relationships,

Called h , called π , called c , *et cetera*,

Sustained throughout and about

The meaty fabric of all that is apparently known...

And we stand before this Tree of Knowledge,

Unable either to eat or ask why not,

For either militant gesture bespeaks the disavowal of logic,

The repudiation of reason,

A maladaptive clinging to some sort of ghost,

In some sort of machine.

